

THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

TO END A MANDATE:
Sir E. L. Spears and the Anglo-
French Collision in the Levant,
1941-1945

being a Thesis submitted for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
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by

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A B B R E V I A T I O N S

I. PUBLIC RECORD OFFICE DOCUMENTS:

Group
Letters

CAB	Cabinet papers
CO	Colonial Office files
FO	Foreign Office files and related papers
PREM	Files of the Prime Minister and Minister of Defence
WO	War Office Files and War Diaries

In each case, these Group Letters are followed by Class Numbers and Piece Numbers, e.g., F0371/27293. In this form, references may readily be located in the archives. In the case of the FO Class, this will also save the would-be inquirer from oscillating between the Foreign Office Index and the Class Lists. On the whole, there are individual files within each Piece. These are listed after the Piece Numbers, e.g., F0371/27293/E4276.

II. OTHER SOURCES:

F.R.U.S. U.S. Department of State. Foreign Relations of the United States: 1941. Washington, 1956.

SPRS Unpublished papers of Major-General Sir Edward Louis Spears, deposited at the Middle East Centre, St. Antony's College, Oxford, and at Churchill College, Cambridge. Unless otherwise stated, the references are to be located in the Oxford papers. These include the Spears Diary.

L I S T O F A P P E N D I C E S

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

We have already declared our intention...of restoring the greatness and independence of France, and this covers those parts of the Empire which have declared, or may declare, for General de Gaulle...

Lord Halifax (November 1940)*

But now a new source of trouble arose in that old seed-bed of Anglo-French misunderstanding, the Levant.

Duff Cooper +

According to the political maps, the British and French Empires were at their zenith on the eve of the Second World War. The previous world conflict had certainly given much impetus to nationalist movements and obliged the metropolitan powers to make concessions in some colonial quarters.¹ Nevertheless Britain and France, while paying lip-service to notions of self-determination, had actually extended their overseas possessions by acquiring most of the old Ottoman and German empires under the guise of League of Nations mandates. In the Middle East, where the British themselves had encouraged an Arab revolt against the Turks, both Britain and France had to reckon with increasingly articulate and volatile nationalist pressures. Some compromises were necessary, but even here the metropolitans were rulers in all but name. On the eve of the Second World War, despite the currents of anti-colonialism, Britain and France still controlled the two greatest overseas empires in the world.²

All this was struck into the hazard by the catastrophic events of 1940. Suddenly Britain and France were facing defeat, and were in desperate need of the loyalty, manpower and facilities of their empires. In contrast to the First World War, these great colonial powers suffered a military collapse in May-June 1940. The much-vaunted French army was overwhelmed, metropolitan France

* War Cabinet memorandum, in F0371/24361/C13251.

+ Old Men Forget (1953), p.351.

was eclipsed, and Britain was driven into precarious isolation. In many of their overseas territories, serious new doubts arose concerning the prestige and credibility of Britain and France. The ultimate exposure of their imperial impotence came in 1942, when the Japanese swept through South East Asia, unchallenged by the French in Indochina and undeterred by the inadequate British forces. The humiliation of the Europeans was crowned by the fall of Singapore.

Long before the Japanese onslaught, however, the disaster of 1940 created a tortuous imperial predicament for the French and, consequently, for the British. The French empire was decapitated. Before France fell, there had been talk of continuing the war from North Africa and other strongholds, where many troops, arms and ships were still available. But Pétain, Weygand and others dismissed this idea in favour of the Franco-German armistice, which left the French fleet and empire intact. The new Pétainist government at Bordeaux (subsequently at Vichy) set about consolidating its authority throughout the empire, insuring that the French proconsuls accepted the armistice and the new regime.

The French colonial rulers were in a painful and anomalous position. It was now their task to uphold the imperium of a nation which was itself defeated, humiliated and occupied by a foreign power. To make matters worse, they were faced with conflicting appeals made in the name of France. On one side lay Vichy legitimacy, the French military establishment and the compensating image of Pétain; on the other there came de Gaulle's dramatic call to repudiate the armistice and use the resources of the Empire to avenge the honour of France. It was a cruel and paradoxical choice: on one hand, an abject but well-subscribed legality; on the other, a bold but illegitimate call to defy the invaders of France.*

By the autumn of 1940, the French colonial governors - most of them military men - had recovered from the initial shock and confusion of the French defeat, and had in most cases accepted the

* De Gaulle made personal appeals to key figures in the empire, and declared his readiness to fight under Noguès, the commander of North Africa. But only General Georges Catroux, in distant Indochina, rejected Vichy's settlement with the Axis.

authority of Vichy. Some of them did so with their colonial embarrassment in mind. Pierre Boisson, High Commissioner of West Africa and a staunch Pétainist, saw the Free French cause as a threat to the stability and future of the empire. "Dissidence is a very contagious disease for which the whites will pay in the end", he declared. "Movements that do not respect hierarchy carry within themselves the ferment of dissolution".³

Nevertheless a vital handful of French colonial authorities responded to the Free French ideal and gave it some territorial substance. By mid-September, a few resolute men like Governor Eboué and Colonel Leclerc had secured Chad, French Equatorial Africa and the Cameroons for Free France. Smaller gains included various island groups, but the biggest prizes - North Africa, the Levant, and West Africa (the latter important for the battle of the Atlantic) - still eluded de Gaulle.

The fall of France and the Vichy-Gaullist imperial contest presented Britain with new dangers and dilemmas. Her first anxiety was the fate of the strong French navy, which was to be demobilised under Axis supervision. Isolated and heavily dependent on her naval supremacy, Britain could not allow the great French battleships to be placed under Hitler's dubious guarantee. On 3 July, Operation Catapult was implemented to secure the neutrality - or in the last resort the destruction - of all accessible French warships. Persuasion worked with the French squadron at Alexandria, but at Mers-el-Kebir (Oran) there was a tragic engagement in which many hundreds of French sailors were killed and several French battleships eliminated.

Mers-el-Kebir symbolised the terrible completion of that Anglo-French estrangement wrought by Hitler's blitzkrieg in the West. Vichy retaliated by bombing Gibraltar and breaking off formal relations with Britain on 5 July. A month later an exchange of letters between Churchill and de Gaulle formalised the finances and Allied status of Free France.⁴ There followed the Free French successes in central Africa, which London welcomed as a great boost to de Gaulle's enterprise, and a useful air link with the Middle

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East. These gains were followed up by an attempt on Dakar, the great port and naval base of French West Africa. Churchill was anxious to rule out the possibility of U-boat bases along this Atlantic coast, and de Gaulle saw a slim chance to extend his cause right through this region to Morocco. The War Cabinet was prevailed upon to risk the wrath of metropolitan France. In September an Anglo-Free French amphibious expedition sailed for West Africa, but misfortune, poor security and Boisson's stiff resistance thwarted the attempt on Dakar. Churchill faced the music and stood by de Gaulle in Parliament, and Vichy bombed Gibraltar again.

Despite these aggressive and pro-Gaullist acts, however, the curious status of France and its empire led Britain to perform a delicate balancing act in the autumn of 1940. To the disgust of the single-minded de Gaulle, shadowy and tenuous communications passed between London and Vichy. In order to limit the damage that could be done if Pétain collaborated fully with Germany, certain assurances were offered concerning the restoration of French sovereignty and the integrity of the French empire. Beneath the cruder realities, the long view taken in London was not without some genuine sentiment. Churchill's radio appeal to the French on 21 October, for all its characteristic rhetoric, reflected the constant B.B.C. theme that Britain had no plans to annex French colonies: "Do not imagine, as the German-controlled wireless tells you, that we English seek to take your ships and colonies.... We do not covet anything from any nation".⁵

At the end of October, one Professor Rougier, an emissary from Pétain, was received in London. He was told that the French empire would be restored to France if she refrained from allowing the Axis to take over her naval and air bases. On 7 November the British Ambassador in Madrid was asked to explain to the Vichy Ambassador that "our aim is and always has been...to ensure the restoration of France...including those territories which at present look to the Free French movement. We covet no inch of French territory for ourselves". The essence of this assurance was repeated

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several times in November 1940, and at the end of that month the Vichy Ambassador in Madrid was handed an aide-memoire to the effect that Britain had no plans to annex French territory:

His Majesty's Government would recall that they have already declared their intention, when victory is achieved, of restoring the greatness and independence of France, and that this covers those parts of the empire which have declared or may declare for de Gaulle.

In return for these assurances, London asked Vichy to maintain the neutrality of its fleet at Toulon and its colonial bases, and to refrain from attacking Free French colonies.⁶

These were the early expressions of an imperial policy which, despite the changing circumstances of a six-year war, Britain was to follow and to extend with a general consistency throughout the French empire. The spirit of these early pledges was reiterated when later complications arose, such as the Japanese expansion and the American hostility to European imperialism.⁷ The general pattern, beneath the confusions and tragedies of the Vichy-Gaullist dichotomy, was one of imperial solidarity in the face of common threats.⁸ Thus Syria and the Lebanon, Madagascar and Indochina (despite the Americans) were entrusted to Gaullist administrations by the British forces which occupied these areas. The British, despite the chronic suspicions of de Gaulle, showed a broad sympathy for the French empire throughout the war. This was particularly striking in Indochina, where British troops held the ring (and were execrated by the Americans and the Viet Minh) until French forces arrived.⁹

For present purposes, the politics of the Anglo-American landings in North Africa (November 1942) may be omitted, for even here there was no question of France itself being supplanted, and Roosevelt's anti-Gaullism caused no more than a temporary flaw in the pattern of Britain's policy. Throughout the war, Britain pursued a policy of respecting the basic framework of the French empire, entrusting to de Gaulle the administration of captured Vichy colonies and assisting him to maintain the imperium of France. On the whole,

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it is beyond dispute that Britain avoided any temptation to annex French territories, and made an immense logistical and diplomatic contribution to the restoration of the French empire. Even de Gaulle could not substantially dispute this generalisation. There was however one glaring exception, one case in which Britain was repeatedly accused of exploiting the French predicament and undermining the French position. That exception was the Levant.

The French mandates of Syria and the Lebanon - the Levant States - were created after the collapse of the Ottoman empire. In 1919, Britain and France proceeded by prior agreement to award themselves the former Turkish domains in the Middle East, despite Britain's contradictory promises to the Arabs, with whom Lawrence had advanced to Damascus. Britain acquired Iraq, Palestine and Transjordan, while the French gained Syria and the Lebanon, where they had longstanding cultural interests. Having seized these areas, Britain and France had them officially designated as League of Nations mandates. Under this mitigating mantle, they exercised their notions of power and empire in the Middle East. It was a volatile inheritance. In the Levant, the French could only impose their authority by naked force, expelling Lawrence's former Arab comrades from Damascus in 1920. Even greater force was used in 1925/6 to suppress a determined Arab revolt in Syria. The British were also troubled by ethnic confrontations and insurrection in Palestine.

Beyond these internal difficulties, Britain and France soon proved to be jealous and uneasy neighbours in the Middle East. This incompatibility was rooted in the dubious origin of their mandates, their artificial sub-division of the Fertile Crescent* and their pursuit of contrasting colonial attitudes within the Arab world. The rich culture of France became an insular chauvinism when exported to the Levant, where the French pursued their mission civilisatrice. On one hand, this meant a network of schools, hospitals and cultural institutes; public utilities; improved communications; and a vast body of civil and commercial legislation. Conversely, it meant the imposition of a foreign code upon proud and ancient peoples. This

* The post-war settlement in the Middle East was more favourable to the British than the original Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916.

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intrinsic affront was aggravated by an elaborate and condescending French bureaucracy, originally designed for the less-advanced Muslims of the Maghreb. The cultured bourgeoisie of the Levant were further alienated by the arrogance and mediocrity of most French officers. Thus the lofty vision of an extended French civilisation, with its implicit threat to the indigenous culture, was entrusted to some rather unworthy "missionaries" in whose hands it was reduced to an overbearing chauvinism. These problems were intensified by the creation of an enlarged Lebanese state in which the Maronite Christians were given disproportionate privileges at Muslim expense. In personal, social and political terms, Franco-Arab relations were thoroughly unsatisfactory.

French concern for this state of affairs tended to be linked with grievances against the neighbouring British, whose aims and methods were of a different character. British rule in the Middle East was less high-minded but usually more tolerable. Its main concerns - oil, the Suez canal and strategic military bases - were distinctly worldly. London preferred to let individual enthusiasts think about the mind and the spirit. This official lack of noble intentions had the ironic effect of making British rule less offensive to the Arabs. (It is significant that the disastrous exception occurred in Palestine, where London's support for the Zionist ideal confounded British pragmatism). Britain also had a long experience of indirect rule in Egypt, and a vague pro-Arab tradition which was often promoted in the mandates by men with a genuine respect for Arab culture.¹⁰

On the whole, relations with the Arabs were more satisfactory in the British mandates, and critics of French rule were not slow to make irksome comparisons. It was, perhaps, inevitable that the keen Arabists among Britain's mandatory officers should take a dim view of French policy in the Levant. Their attitude was typically expressed by Glubb Pasha* in his report of a meeting with the Free French General Collet, who had served in Syria for 23 years:

* The British Commander of Transjordan's Arab Legion.

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The principal differences which I noticed between Collet and myself were not so much personal as national...

Wherever the British have penetrated, we meet British officers who believe the Bedouins, the Kurds, the Ghurkas...to be the most splendid fellows on earth. The French do not share this passionate interest in other races - they only praise individuals or communities in so far as they have become Gallicized....

If there is one Frenchman in Syria who has lived most of his life with Muslims, it is Collet. Yet I found him essentially antipathetic to the Arabs. It seems hopeless to imagine that the antipathy between the Syrians and the French can ever be overcome... 11

It was natural enough that such British "Arabophiles" should condemn French colonial aims, which certainly de-valued Arab culture. But the French were highly sensitive to criticism emanating from the British sphere, and it was equally natural that they should see in this the aspirations of Lawrence's disciples. Since men like Kirkbride, the British Resident in Amman, were veterans of Lawrence's enterprise, this suspicion was only too plausible. It was deepened by the fact that Arab notables throughout the region were given to drawing similar anti-French comparisons.¹² All the tangled rivalries and suspicions which had preceded the Anglo-French settlement in the Fertile Crescent were recalled and rekindled by the polemical contrasts between French and British rule.

Comparison and contrast created an atmosphere of resentful and jealous competition. On the French side, the conviction grew that the British were making an appeal to Arab goodwill at the expense of the French. A hostile interpretation was therefore placed upon the events which showed that Britain was ready to concede a limited independence in some areas of the Middle East. From the French perspective, these concessions were frequently incompatible with the dream of an extended European civilisation. For the British, however, it was not so hard to make cultural, social and political concessions. Once these were seen as the key to Arab goodwill, British pragmatism and native opportunism made a virtue of these concessions. Thus, the Anglo-Iraqi treaty of 1930 transformed the mandate into a lopsided alliance, and the Iraqis henceforth conducted their own internal

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affairs within the (considerable) limits of Britain's strategic requirements. Good relations had been established with the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, there was some relaxation of direct control in Transjordan, and in 1936 there came the Anglo-Egyptian treaty. With the sorry exception of Palestine, the British appeared to be reconciling their requirements with the emerging ideals of Arab independence and unity.¹³

These developments tended to set French rule in an even more unfavourable light, and made an increasing anachronism of Arab affairs in the Levant States. The modest political devolution allowed by the British was therefore resented by the French. Conversely, the British execrated the French for their ill-disguised satisfaction over the Palestinian revolts in 1929 and 1936-8. Arab insurgents were harboured and assisted by the Syrians, and the French conspicuously failed to discourage this frontier game. Perhaps the British forgot that in 1925 the Syrian rebels had found similar shelter in Transjordan, but the French had not forgotten.

In 1936, disillusioned with their vision of Overseas France and troubled by new disorders, the French yielded to the tide and negotiated treaties with the Syrians and Lebanese. These were modelled on the Anglo-Iraqi agreement, and were eventually approved by the Syrian and Lebanese Chambers. Ratification was required by the end of 1938, but after a reactionary campaign by mandatory officials and the Right in France, the French refused to complete the treaty. The resulting hostility and bitterness in the Levant was completed in 1939 by the cynical French cession of Alexandretta to the Turks. Once France was at war with Germany, this ominous situation was placed in a kind of deep-freeze. The French suspended the Levant constitutions indefinitely, built up the Army of the Levant under Weygand and cracked down on any hint of political agitation.¹⁴

At the time of the Franco-German armistice, then, Anglo-French mandatory rule in the Middle East was still continuing, though mitigated in some areas and subjected to serious strain in others. Franco-Arab affairs were poisonous, and this widened the gulf which separated the French and British authorities in the Middle East.

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The French already saw Britain's prudent patronage of Arab aspirations as a plot to manoeuvre France out of the Levant, while the British deplored the bruising effects of a chauvinistic French colonial mentality. Before a single shot had been fired in the Middle East, it was evident that if there was to be an Anglo-French imperial understanding, its Achilles heel would be the Levant.

In 1940, the senior French authorities in the Levant, swayed by Weygand and Pétain, reluctantly accepted the armistice and remained neutral towards their southern neighbours, the British. This suited the latter, who were increasingly hard-pressed as the Anglo-Axis conflict spread through the Mediterranean to the Middle East. But *laissez-faire* did not last. In June 1941, after Axis aircraft had been allowed to use Syrian airfields, Anglo-Free French troops invaded and occupied the Levant States. British troops henceforth predominated, as most of the pro-Vichy troops refused to join de Gaulle and were repatriated. Nevertheless, political affairs and the civil administration were entrusted to the Free French.

It was a desperate and maladroit enterprise. Militarily inadequate but anxious to acquire the Levant, the Free French promised independence and an end to the mandate in return for Syrian support. Once ensconced in the Levant, however, the Gaullists installed paper republics and insisted that the mandate was still valid. Nationalist agitation increased, and the British - who were publicly associated with Free French promises - insisted on further concessions. Elections were held in 1943 and resulted in clear nationalist victories. The new Lebanese government, despite internal ethnic differences, promptly and formally repudiated the French mandate, and an ugly crisis ensued. The French imprisoned the Lebanese Cabinet, dissolved the Chamber and installed a puppet President. The British intervened and secured the restoration of the Lebanese government, but the mandate issue was unresolved. The Levantines sought further concessions, the Gaullists a treaty to secure French privileges. In 1945, the arrival of French reinforcements sparked off another conflict which culminated in the indiscriminate shelling of Damascus.

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This time the British army moved in and took over the control of public order and security throughout the Levant. French authority was effectively displaced, and by September 1946 - after more wrangling - all European troops had left Syria and the Lebanon.

It is immediately obvious that the fundamental British policy towards the French empire broke down badly in the Levant. Yet it is no easy matter to account for this curious affair, and its causes have been hotly disputed. To gather the available evidence, the inquirer is obliged to forage in a minefield of polemics created by the original contenders and their apologists. There, for all the distortions, special pleading and oversimplification, lie many useful insights and valuable clues.

Three distinct and contrasting points of view have been expounded. The Francophiles, including Eden and Duff Cooper, argued that one ruthless man exploited the legacy of Anglo-French rivalry and the temporary British advantages in the Levant to destroy the French position. That man was Major-General Sir Edward Louis Spears, Britain's Minister Plenipotentiary to Syria and the Lebanon. Once a distinguished Francophile himself, Spears had ably supported the Free French enterprise and accompanied de Gaulle to the Middle East in 1941. There the two men fell out, and Spears became a fervent Arabophile. (See Chapter Four). As one writer claimed in 1945:

It is quite certain that had General Spears not followed a policy of deliberate provocation, there would be no French-Syrian problem at this moment. But the position of France in Syria and in the world was so weak... that the moment seemed propitious for giving the coup de grace to its influence in the Levant. The temptation was there, and General Spears, ignoring the remoter consequences of such an attitude, succumbed to it unreservedly. 15

De Gaulle and his supporters, whilst attributing to Spears all kinds of sinister activities, are not content with this explanation. In their view, Churchill and Spears were master and man, and the latter was simply the most effective tool of a British policy of securing Arab goodwill at the expense of the French mandates. "Their game", wrote de Gaulle, was

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settled in London by firmly established services, carried out on the spot by a team without scruples but not without resources, accepted by the Foreign Office, which sometimes sighed over it but never disavowed it, and supported by the Prime Minister, whose ambiguous promises and calculated emotions camouflaged what was intended.... British policy would therefore endeavour, sometimes stealthily and sometimes harshly, to replace France at Damascus and at Beirut. 16

This sweeping accusation is flatly contradicted by the Arabophiles. They claim that the collapse of the French mandate had nothing to do with sinister British machinations, which were really a product of the Gallic imagination. As one of Spears' regional officers, Colonel William Stirling, wrote:

In the eyes of every Frenchman I was tarred with the Lawrence brush and assumed to be working against the interests of France. They never realised how much I had done to protect their interests.... I steadily adhered to the policy laid down by my chief, General Spears. No action of mine ever harmed the relations between the Arabs and the French.

Stirling, a former colleague of Lawrence, was well acquainted with Syrian affairs. In common with his fellow Arabophiles, he held that French tribulations in the Levant were self-inflicted and that France's ignominious eviction was a piece of poetic justice:

France...held Syria under the mandate for over twenty years, during which she was supposed to teach and guide the people...to prepare them for eventual self-government. This she never began to do.... Is it to be wondered at that the Syrians [grew] more and more restless, and more and more determined to rid themselves of the dead hand of France? 17

According to this viewpoint, the upheavals of 1941, the hollow promises made by the Free French and their failure to change the character of French rule completed the downfall of a mandate which was already discredited and living on borrowed time. Accusations of British perfidy in general, and Spears' guilt in particular, are therefore dismissed as irrelevant and misleading.

There are varying degrees of truth, however distorted and partial, in these common explanations of the Levant affair. All, of course, vindicate their own camps rather too neatly. Thus Spears is made the scapegoat for much British bungling; de Gaulle omits the profound failure of French policy in the Levant; and some of the Arabophiles would have us believe that they behaved like broken-hearted saints in Syria, dutifully implementing a policy which they privately abominated.

The half-truths and contradictions of these partisan versions have not been sufficiently overcome by the available histories of this Anglo-French imbroglio. This is largely due to the lack of documentary evidence at the time of writing, rather than any lack of industry. Another kind of documentary problem occurs in the case of the so-called Official History, which seems to suffer from tunnel vision.¹⁸ Based too narrowly upon one departmental source, it tends to support the myth of Spears' villainy by its uncritical paraphrasing of bureaucratic opinions which were often ill-founded. (See Chapter Eight in particular).

It has recently become possible to provide a far more detailed account of the Levant affair. This is not to say that all the documentary problems are solved. No French equivalent to the material now available in England was open to the present writer. Nor is it to be expected that files from the Levant would have passed unscathed through the Vichy-Gaullist ordeal. There will always be some gaps, on both sides of the Channel. Nevertheless a wealth of fresh documentary evidence has become accessible in England. Nearly all of the relevant files of the British government are now open, and more private papers and memoirs may now be consulted. Of these, the most extensive and valuable are the diaries and papers of General Spears.

The following pages, therefore, are an attempt to construct a more fully documented and detailed account of the Anglo-French relationship in the Levant from 1941 to 1945. Wherever possible, original documents are quoted and the dramatis personae are allowed to speak in their own words. Even so, in terms of sheer quantity,

only the tip of the documentary iceberg appears. If more of the original atmosphere and mentality has been re-captured, and if the wartime voices are more readily heard and considered, this approach will have been justified. A narrative form has been used, partly to emphasise that much can only be explained in the light of the war situation with its pressures, confusions and improvisations. Interpretation and analysis accompany the unfolding narrative, and the significance of various events and attitudes is reiterated and weighed in the conclusion.

Within this purpose, and inseparable from it, is an attempt to understand Sir Edward Spears and to establish his role. The Anglo-French collision in the Levant involved some remarkable personalities on both sides. The most striking character of them all was Spears, the man at the centre of the controversy. His papers and diaries throw new light on his own activities and upon the whole Levant dispute, and full use has been made of this source. In particular, I have tried to depict and interpret Spears' dramatic break with de Gaulle, and the ex-Francophile's subsequent view of his role in the Middle East. This innings on the sticky wicket of psychology was clearly necessary. The sudden and fateful change in Spears' attitude was to loom large in the Levant affair. A non-polemical explanation was well overdue, and with the aid of new sources I have attempted to provide it.

Finally, much space has been devoted to the year 1941. Within the period of the Anglo-Gaullist occupation of the Levant, no other year was so packed with crucial events and fateful decisions. 1941 produced the terms of reference for all the ensuing Anglo-French disputes and confrontations in the Levant.

N O T E S

- 1 See, for example, R. von Albertini, Decolonization (1971), pp. 4-14; Geoffrey Barraclough, An Introduction to Contemporary History (1967), pp. 153-158.
- 2 In formal terms, that is. Despite the American anti-colonial myth, and the Leninist doctrine of imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism, both the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. had enormous disguised empires of their own: the former in Latin America and the Pacific, the latter in the old Tsarist empire.
- 3 Quoted in D. Bruce Marshall, The French Colonial Myth and Constitution-Making in the Fourth Republic (1973), p.79.
- 4 Churchill and de Gaulle letters, 7 August 1940, F0371/24360/C8172.
- 5 Winston S. Churchill, The Second World War (6 vols., 1948-54), ii.453.
- 6 Foreign Office tel., 1 November 1940, F0371/24361/C11442; Foreign Office tel., 7 November 1940, F0371/24303/C11713; Copy of Aide-memoire, and Foreign Office tel., 23 November 1940, F0371/24303/C12183.
- 7 Albertini, pp. 20-23; F.R.Dulles and G.E.Ridinger, "The Anti-Colonial Policies of Franklin D. Roosevelt", Political Science Quarterly, Vol.LXX, No.1, March 1955; G.R.Hess, "Franklin Roosevelt and Indochina", Journal of American History, Vol.LIX, No.2, September 1972.
- 8 Foreign Office paper, "The Future of the French Colonial Empire", April 1944, F0371/41931.
- 9 Louis Allen, "Studies in the Japanese Occupation of South-East Asia 1942-1945 (ii) 'French Indo-China' to 'Vietnam'. Japan, France and Great Britain, Summer 1945", Durham University Journal, Vol.LXIV, No.2, March 1972.
- 10 H.A.R.Gibb, "The Relations of France and Great Britain with the Arab World and with each other in the Eastern Mediterranean", (Foreign Office Research Paper, 4 November 1940), F0371/27308/E5450.
- 11 Lieutenant-Colonel J.B.Glubb, "A Note on a Visit to Damascus, 27-28 November 1941", C0831/58/77065.

- 12 Some of these, like the Emir Abdullah of Transjordan, nursed the old dream of Arab rule in Damascus by playing a semi-realistic game of intrigue with the Syrian Arabs. See, for example, Sir Alec Kirkbride, A Crackle of Thorns (1956), p.142f.
- 13 Gibb paper, 4 November 1940, F0371/27308/E5450.
- 14 Ibid.; Interview with Sir Geoffrey Furlonge, 17 May 1978. Furlonge was at the British Consulate from 1934 to 1946. After the confusions of 1941, he became the British Consul at Beirut and an adviser to the British Minister Plenipotentiary in the Levant..
- 15 Michael Clark, "Syria: Near East Cockpit", Nation, 17 March 1945, p.301.
- 16 Charles de Gaulle, War Memoirs (3 vols., with companion document vols., 1955-60), i.188.
- 17 Lieutenant-Colonel William F. Stirling, Safety Last (1953), p.220f.
- 18 Sir Llewellyn Woodward, British Foreign Policy in the Second World War (5 vols., 1970-76), iv.211-343. On the other hand, these chapters provide a very full account of Foreign Office attitudes to the Levant dispute.



Voilà le commencement de la fin.

Talleyrand

Allenby gave me a telegram from the Foreign Office... and told me to translate it to the Emir: but none of us knew what it meant in English, let alone in Arabic...

T.E. Lawrence*

In the autumn of 1940 Vichy France had consolidated its position in the greater part of the French Empire. This was a bitter blow to de Gaulle and a further anxiety for the British, for it left several strategic territories in the hands of men who seemed only too susceptible to Axis pressure. Among these areas, the French mandates of Syria and Lebanon soon forced themselves on the attention of both the British and the Free French, though not always for the same reasons.

From the British viewpoint, the Levant States assumed an increasingly dangerous significance after June 1940. For in that month, while France was being overrun, Italy declared war. Mussolini's decision immediately threatened the whole British position in the Mediterranean, the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. At that time the British Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East, Wavell, had a mere 50,000 troops, while Italian forces in Libya, Eritrea and Ethiopia numbered half a million.¹

In these circumstances the British could not be indifferent to developments in the Levant States, which quickly came under the authority of Vichy. If, for instance, enemy forces were granted facilities in the Levant - as they soon were in Indochina - then the British would have been disastrously outflanked. In London, these bleak prospects were outlined to the War Cabinet's Middle East Committee:

* Seven Pillars of Wisdom (1926), p.683.

British policy in the Middle East has hitherto been based on the assumption that Syria and the Lebanon would remain...under the effective influence of France. This assumption has been shaken by the capitulation of the Bordeaux Government and the disappearance of France as a great Power....

Strategically speaking, the whole British position in the Middle East, including Egypt and Arabia, will probably be untenable unless Syria and the Lebanon are under friendly control or failing that British control. 2

Vichy intentions in the Levant were not easy to predict, and a Delphic ambiguity characterised the diplomatic scene in the French mandates. British consular officials had never been fêted but they were at least acceptable until June 1940. Then the French attitude changed "almost overnight" to distinct hostility, and by the end of June the Consulates in Beirut, Damascus and Aleppo existed in a state of antagonism with the French. (The Beirut Consulate was obliged to move inland to Aley, as its presence in a Vichy port was unacceptable). Yet when Vichy broke off formal relations with Britain in July, these Consulates continued their anomalous existence in a kind of diplomatic limbo.³

In their official statement of 2 July, the British made their attitude clear to all Levant-watchers, including Arab opportunists and covetous neutrals like Turkey:

His Majesty's Government declare that they could not allow Syria or the Lebanon to be occupied by any hostile Power or to be used as a base for attacks upon those countries in the Middle East which they are pledged to defend, or to become the scene of such disorder as to constitute a danger to those countries. They therefore hold themselves free to take whatever measures they may in such circumstances consider necessary in their own interests. 4

By November 1940, the Mediterranean arena had been further complicated by Mussolini's attack on Greece, and the Levantine question-mark still remained. At that point Churchill told his Foreign Secretary that Britain must

obtain control of Syria by one means or another in the next few months [but] until we have dealt with the Italians in Libya we have no troops to spare for a northern venture. On no account must Italian or Caitiff-Vichy influences become or remain paramount in Syria. 5

The Mediterranean threat was temporarily reduced by resolute action in North Africa, where an Italian army was destroyed and its tattered remnants driven out of Cyrenaica in February 1941. To the south, as well, British troops were soon gaining the ascendancy in Italian East Africa.

The Duce had signally failed to sweep the British from the shores of the eastern Mediterranean, but his formidable German ally now took a hand, and the overall situation soon became more desperate than ever. The trouble began when Hitler sent Rommel's mechanised contingent to succour his woebegone partner in Libya. Wavell had meanwhile been ordered to stop the British offensive, and to send a better-equipped expedition to Greece instead. Sensing his opportunity, Rommel turned an armoured reconnaissance into an audacious assault and the British were driven pell-mell out of Libya. By mid-April, the defiant garrison at Tobruk was the only reminder of Wavell's inconclusive victories. It was a month of cruel futility, for the Greek expedition proved to be a disaster. By the end of April, the Germans had overrun Greece and subjected the British forces to a Balkan Dunkirk. All their tanks were lost and 12,000 troops fell into German hands. 6

As Wavell's whole position deteriorated, Britain's tenure in the eastern Mediterranean became dubious. The idea of an Italian Syria now paled before the possibility of a German one, and meanwhile the Levant States remained in the unpredictable, unreliable hands of Vichy. In British calculations, therefore, a Vichy Levant seemed at best a nuisance, at worst a Trojan horse for the Axis. It could hardly be tolerated indefinitely.

For strategic reasons, the British had for some time been considering a move to secure the Levant States. To this end they

were prodded by the Free French, who were even more anxious to control Syria and Lebanon. This imperative sprang from the fundamental Gaullist attitude that the defeat of the metropolis was not the defeat of France, that the battle must be pursued by "Overseas France". It was therefore essential that a significant part of the French Empire should remain in the fight: "it was essential to bring back into the war not merely some Frenchmen, but France". To simply provide British auxiliaries was unthinkable. De Gaulle sought for France "the re-appearance of our armies on the battlefields, the return of our territories to belligerence... to bring our sovereignty out from disaster".⁷

In pursuit of this vision, de Gaulle made his bid for Overseas France, gaining equatorial Africa and being denied West Africa, North Africa, the Levant and other territories. This was barely enough to make Free France viable, and its adherents strove to improve their position in the French territories. In this all-consuming quest, any distinction between colonies and mandates became irrelevant.

From September 1940 Gaullist attention was drawn more and more towards the Levant, where hope still glimmered. If only the Frenchmen there could be won over, Free France would be a substantial force based on its own Mediterranean territory. Standing its own ground in a vital war zone, it would have a practical strength not enjoyed by governments-in-exile in London, and a distinct identity which de Gaulle would wield skilfully. Above all, it would have a solid fighting force. Such a force already existed in the Army of the Levant, which was 70,000 strong in June 1940. If only de Gaulle could prevail over Vichy in the realm of loyalties, this army could be the nucleus of a formidable Free France. Looking therefore to the eastern Mediterranean, the Gaullists hoped to bring most of the Army of the Levant into the Free French fold.⁸

Yet in the mind of de Gaulle these considerations mingled with more Machiavellian anxieties, including his ancestral suspicions of British perfidy. De Gaulle felt that, in the Middle East,

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political, racial and religious passions and ambitions were being sharpened, [that] France's positions there were sapped and coveted, and that there was, on any hypothesis, no chance of her keeping any of them if...she remained passive when everything was in the melting pot.

It was therefore imperative that Free France should raise its banner over the Levant, for then

France would have a chance of bringing an important contribution to the common effort. Otherwise, with this chance lost, the position of France would likewise be lost.

[If] the Axis won, it would dominate there as elsewhere. If the opposite happened, the English would take our place. The authority of Free France must therefore be extended to Damascus and to Beirut... 9

This attitude was not entirely concealed from General Spears, whose liaison duties frequently placed him alongside de Gaulle. "He realised the great importance of this theatre in the strategy of the war", wrote Spears, "but what he was really concerned about was the political future of the States under French Mandate". Such unedifying preoccupations rather offended Spears, who viewed the Levant States with unabashed military simplicity: "I was interested only in the extent to which the British cause would be strengthened by their becoming involved on our side. I had never visited those countries and knew nothing of their inhabitants". 10

From the earliest conceptions of a joint venture in the Levant, British and Free French leaders never enjoyed unanimity of motivations, emphases or objectives. In addition, both had their internal disagreements over the Levant. But it became clear that in order to gain the Levant they would have need of each other. As the British Ambassador in Cairo later expressed it, Syria was

a most valuable prize. If we could rally it to Free France we should at a stroke establish land connexion with Turkey, obtain control of a breeding ground of Axis intrigue in the Arab world and give an impetus to the Free French who would obtain some troops and material.

This to my mind remains the best solution to work for. We cannot occupy Syria for ourselves even for duration of the war without appearing to break our pledge that we have no designs on French Colonial territory. Alternative of trying to appease Vichy [would] only give us a stable Syria if the Germans allow... 11

It was in that spirit that the British had first responded to Free French schemes to acquire the Levant by one means or another. This project began in earnest when the ranking Free Frenchman, General Georges Catroux, arrived in Cairo at the end of September 1940.¹² Despite his seniority, this elegant and courteous man appeared readily to accept de Gaulle's leadership. As an old hand in Islamic affairs and a former Governor-General of Damascus, Catroux was the obvious choice for the control of Free French interests in the Middle East. Having arrived in London on 16 September to join Free France, Catroux was swiftly briefed and with Churchill's blessing found himself in Cairo before the month was out.

Such commendable despatch failed to please de Gaulle, who thought he detected a British attempt to unseat him while he was away on the ill-fated Dakar expedition. Wiring a sharp response to Churchill, he nevertheless refrained from telling Catroux to alter his plans. Instead, he received his illustrious recruit at Fort Lamy in mid-October. There the correct apostolic succession was acknowledged to de Gaulle's satisfaction, and Catroux's Middle Eastern position openly ratified. De Gaulle had already been mollified to some extent by Churchill's reply:

From every quarter the presence of General Catroux was demanded in Syria. I therefore took the responsibility in your name of inviting the General to go there. It is of course perfectly understood that he holds his position only from you.... Sometimes one has to take decisions on the spot because of their urgency and the difficulty of explaining to others at a distance. 13.

Yet there remained a suspicion that the British leader had been tampering with the Free French movement.¹⁴

On 28 September de Gaulle nevertheless cabled his blessing to Catroux:

I entirely approve of your departure for Levant to take action, and I wish to thank you for assuming this very important task. I felt obliged to protest to British Government concerning form of its intervention. But naturally my reaction in no way concerns yourself in whom I have the completest confidence.... There is no one more qualified than yourself to take necessary action.

As Catroux had left London the previous day, this belated approval had to be relayed on to Cairo.¹⁵ Thus, while it is true in a sense that de Gaulle endorsed Catroux's assignment, Catroux did not know this until he reached Cairo. His personal account is misleading on this point, and in following it, Sachar wrongly asserts that Catroux "accepted the assignment only after receiving De Gaulle's express approval".¹⁶

In sending Catroux to Cairo, Churchill had valued the Syrian objective more highly than de Gaulle's amour-propre. But Catroux arrived too late to pull off a bloodless coup in the Levant, where the promising drift of sympathies had been abruptly halted. Careless talk in Syria had exposed the Gaullist elements. Vichy moved swiftly to suppress this tendency and strengthen its own grip on the Levant. Suspects were arrested and repatriated, waverers were relieved of office, and only known Pétainists were retained in key positions. "In short", wrote de Gaulle, "the movement hoped for at the time of General Catroux's arrival in Cairo had not materialised, and [it was not] likely to materialise very soon".¹⁷ This was the grim truth, as the British Consul-General in Beirut tersely advised London on 12 October: "Possibility of inducing Gaullist coup d'état [must] be regarded as remote for time being".¹⁸

The unlucky Catroux had arrived in Cairo only to find that the Free French cause had sustained a heavy blow. It was a disappointing start, and in a personal sense the Vichy measures in

the Levant added insult to injury. Catroux had been Governor-General of Indochina until the defeat of France, when he refused to accept the Franco-German armistice. He was promptly sacked. Having lost the first round to Vichy, the aging General set out for London to link up with Free France. Now he had come to Cairo only to find that, for the second time, Vichy had cut the ground from under his feet.

Nothing loath, Catroux set about resurrecting the Free French cause in the Levant. The prospects were bleak, the resources pitiful, but life in Cairo had its consolations. Indeed, Wavell had Catroux's bulky possessions shipped from Liverpool to Alexandria. These included "some Indo-Chinese servants, Siamese cats and vastly heavy furniture" and weighed as much as a battery of artillery, according to the scandalised Spears, who bluntly asked Wavell which cargo should have priority. This Spartan objection was ignored and Catroux's effects duly arrived in Cairo.¹⁹

At this superficial level, Catroux certainly found the British authorities sympathetic and co-operative.²⁰ They in turn found the Frenchman well-bred, unfailingly polite and relatively pacific. In personal terms it was an agreeable situation, but it frequently undermined the interests of Free France. The alliance was too one-sided, the British controlled virtually all the resources, and in Middle Eastern terms the Free French were very small fry.²¹ It was almost universally assumed, on the British side, that Free French interests were identical to those of Great Britain. If Spears himself could still make this assumption after a full year with de Gaulle, how much more could British officials in the Middle East?²² To the military mind, the Free French were British auxiliaries. Catroux's manner lent itself to this easy equation of British and Free French interests, and from it the most unfortunate consequences were to follow in the Levant. It was not without justification that de Gaulle "came to think that [Catroux's] desire to charm and his leaning towards conciliation were not always suitable".²³

In his initial survey of the situation, Catroux went about under the pseudonym of Monsieur Chartier, wishing to be fully acquainted with the possibilities before revealing his identity to the Vichy French in the Levant.²⁴ To begin with, he still had some hopes of inspiring a coup, or of inducing a massive desertion of Vichy troops across the Palestine frontier. To this end, he hoped that his own presence in the Nile delta might act as a kind of magnet to the Army of the Levant. Early in November he telegraphed de Gaulle:

I am pushing our propaganda vigorously but anonymously. But I consider it necessary at once to test French and native opinion in Syria by raising my incognito.... I shall not try to assume power in Syria unless I feel certain of having with me two-thirds of the army [of the Levant] . 25

It was not the last time that Catroux displayed an unwarranted faith in the effect of his own charisma on the Army of the Levant. Fond of historical analogy, he possibly recalled Napoleon's extraordinary conversion of Ney's troops on the road to Paris. Unfortunately for Catroux a stony lack of response ruled out any repetition of Napoleonic miracles, and he was forced to consider other tactics. Even then he retained a predilection for the dramatic throw of the dice.

Having already referred to "native opinion in Syria", Catroux now came forward with a most fateful suggestion, which was destined to open a Pandora's box of political trouble between Britain and Free France. He decided that the Vichy authorities could be overthrown if Anglo-Free French pressure coincided with an Arab rising in the Levant States. This could be fomented by promising the Arabs independence. During a long discussion with Sir Harold MacMichael, the High Commissioner in Palestine, Catroux confided his latest idea for dislodging the Vichy administration. MacMichael had seen quite enough of Arab insurgency on his own patch, but he evidently concealed his misgivings from Catroux, who found him a good listener.²⁶ MacMichael then informed London of this discussion, in which Kirkbride, the British political

Resident in Transjordan, had also participated:

I inquired diffidently what inducement Chartier would propose to offer to the Syrians if [their] aid were to be invoked. He said that he would propose to offer them independence on something like the Egyptian model, that is to say independence qualified by the need for safe-guarding essential French strategic interests. 27

At the Foreign Office this remarkable report was received like manna, for the perplexed personnel of the Eastern Department saw in Catroux's remarks a solution to the Syrian problem. They had long since explained this problem to the War Cabinet:

The Arabs would hardly be human... if they did not hope, as a result of the present difficulties of France to secure at the least some relaxation of French control in Syria and even in the Lebanon: and at the most complete independence for these countries, with the substitution of British for French protection as a kind of half-way house.

But "nothing would be more likely to prejudice future Anglo-French unity in a wider field than the suspicion that [we] had taken advantage of the difficulties of France to whittle down the French position [in Syria] ". 28

These considerations placed the British in an awkward position, because they could ill-afford to show indifference to Arab aspirations at a time when Arab goodwill was so badly needed. On the Levant question, even Britain's most loyal client seemed bent on embarrassing her to the detriment of Anglo-French relations. Kirkbride, in Transjordan, saw this at first hand:

Another chronic source of complication was that the Amir (later King) Abdullah pursued a Greater Syria policy with enthusiasm and persistence [i.e.] he still worked for the reunion of Jordan and Syria under a Hashmite king, himself.... his effort were unceasing and no amount of discouragement from His Majesty's Government would stop them:

the result was, of course, that the French and Syrians believed firmly that the British were egging King Abdullah on. 29

This recollection is certainly verified by the contemporary documents. As soon as the French administration in Syria had accepted the Vichy armistice, MacMichael reported, Abdullah was straining at the leash:

First reaction of the Amir...was to state his intention of (a) issuing public statement that Transjordan and Syria would henceforth be one country under Great Britain, (b) preparing forces with which to occupy any part of Syria [held by] French or from which they could be ejected. British Resident took the correct line pointing out the disadvantages and difficulties and staved him off but knows he has sent emissaries to his friends in Syria without telling the British Resident.

MacMichael added that the "Amir and [his] intelligentsia...seem to favour the policy of making the position of the French untenable in order to force intervention by us".³⁰

All this called for a considerable feat of diplomatic juggling on the part of the British. They had somehow to meet Arab aspirations without prejudice to the French position and the future of Anglo-French relations. It was against this daunting background that Catroux had come forward, the deus ex machina who with British collaboration would offer to fulfil Arab aspirations.

* * *

Catroux's suggestion set in motion certain ideas and activities which were highly significant for the subsequent Anglo-Free-French occupation of the Levant. From this point there gradually evolved two controversial and unhappy policies: British identification with any Free French pledge of Syrian independence, and the idea of British personnel making preparatory overtures to

various Syrians. It is important to observe the origin of these ideas in some detail, for they were to become the subject of bitter Free French allegations, and were later interpreted as the thin edge of the wedge which levered France out of the Levant altogether.

At the Foreign Office, Catroux's idea inspired a minute which became the basis for an important telegram to Cairo. Its author, P.M. Crosthwaite, thought that Catroux's suggested bid for the support of the Syrians would be ineffective "unless we get things going beforehand.... The ground must be prepared, and above all, they must be prevented from turning to the Axis". Such preparation would be politically risky of course, for "the promise to do our best to bring about certain changes in a part of the world which does not belong to us would certainly be a commitment of an awkward kind". Nevertheless,

if we stick to safety we may get nowhere, and General Catroux at least...seems to be prepared to go really as far as one could wish. General Catroux cannot, of course, speak for France [but we cannot] do all the fighting and restore the "greatness" of France without some sacrifice on her part. Nor is the sacrifice involved in agreeing to an independent Syria in the sense that Egypt or Iraq is independent, a very great one.

That last sentence was certainly not lacking in irony. Crosthwaite concluded by noting that it seemed best as far as possible to deal with Catroux, "as his own views seem so reasonable", and to leave to Catroux himself the delicate task of securing de Gaulle's agreement.³¹ The current Head of Eastern Department felt bound to endorse all this, while stressing the need for "great caution".³² Crosthwaite's suggestions were therefore distilled into a draft telegram and the approval of the Colonial Office was sought.

While this reply was awaited, a most apposite wire was received from Cairo, in which the views already attributed to Catroux were set forth by the man himself:

We cannot...retake Syria except by force, an operation which at the moment is neither possible nor desirable. We could easily obtain assistance of a native rising....

The line to follow at the moment is...to create maximum difficulties...by blockade, weakening army by encouraging desertions by propaganda and, if I consider it necessary, by a declaration of a political character to be made in name of Free France which would promise to Syria instead of a mandate a recognition of independence, reserving essential rights of France and conceived in spirit of treaty between Great Britain and Egypt....

Please communicate the above to General de Gaulle. 33

This statement was welcomed in London, where Crosthwaite minuted that Catroux's scheme to "promise Syria independence on the Egyptian model...is distinctly helpful from the point of view of our relations with the Arabs". Referring to the relevant draft telegram already in the pipeline, Crosthwaite added that if the Colonial Office concurred, Catroux's wire "gives us a good opening".³⁴

By New Year's Day, 1941, the Colonial Office had indeed concurred, virtually without changing a word.³⁵ Early in January a long message was therefore transmitted to the British Ambassador in Cairo, Sir Miles Lampson. It began by referring to the reported desire of certain Syrian emigrés in Iraq for "a Round Table conference between us and leaders of all political parties in Syria, at which we would undertake to use our influence after the war to ensure the establishment of an independent Syria". Such a conference or public commitment, Lampson was told, "seems impossible in present circumstances if only in view of French reactions". Nevertheless it was "important to prevent Nationalists lining up with Axis Powers...and it would have better effect still in Iraq and other Arab countries if they were actually to look to us for support". And while it would be unwise to foment a premature Arab rising in the Levant, "it seems clear that unless ground is well

prepared beforehand, neither we nor Free French can expect help from population in Syria if and when we need it". In spite of the difficulties, therefore,

an effort should be made to establish contact now with Syrian refugees in Iraq [and] if they appear genuinely anxious to co-operate with us, we should consider providing them with money for expenses of their organisation. At the same time it might be desirable to establish contact with other elements in Syria, in particular the Druzes. Please consult General Catroux and let me know his views as soon as possible.

Lampson was also asked to obtain "in due course" Catroux's reactions to another delicate option, which would be avoided for as long as possible:

we may have to give some kind of assurance to [the Syrians] if further progress is to be made; presumably on the lines that we will use our influence after the war to bring about the independence of Syria on the Egyptian and Iraqi model, a solution which I note General Catroux himself has in mind.

Lest Catroux should be unduly alarmed, a comforting thought was added on the nature of independence in the Middle East. "Our experience in Egypt shows that it is possible to make concessions on these lines without surrendering vital requirements, and if example of Iraq is less happy, it must be remembered that we have no ground troops there".³⁶

It is a pity that Catroux's response to the Crosthwaite telegram is still inaccessible.* Yet there can be little doubt that he expressed general approval of these proposals, which were a practical extension of his own plan. The independence proclamation was bound to be more effective if the audience had already been wooed by a judicious blend of propaganda and bribery. The point was taken by Catroux, whose scheme was nothing if not a deliberate exploitation of Syrian nationalism, for a later telegram reports his specific agreement that the contacting and bribery of emigré

* See note 36.

Syrian leaders should continue.³⁷ As for the limitations of Syrian independence, the Foreign Office hardly needed to comfort Catroux: events were to prove that his definition of independence was highly original.

It is also unlikely that Catroux jibbed at a delicate and qualified British participation in this promise of independence, as explained by his sympathetic hosts. At this stage Catroux was acting in close collaboration with Lampson and Wavell, and informing de Gaulle almost as an afterthought. Unlike his chief, he was the most agreeable of allies, not given to dark suspicions of British perfidy.³⁸ It took the unhappy aftermath of a joint invasion to alert him to the considerable gulf between British and Free French interests in the Levant. Even then, according to a Beirut eyewitness, he remained "keen on the war effort".³⁹

It would seem that Catroux gave his general assent to the proposals in the Crosthwaite telegram. This can hardly be said for some British authorities in the Middle East. In Baghdad the British Ambassador, Sir Basil Newton, was uncomfortably aware of Arab discontent in Iraq and expressed his misgivings. He believed that the Syrian nationalists would certainly demand political assurances, which would cause trouble for Britain with the Iraqis and Palestinians as well as the Free French. In Newton's view the Crosthwaite proposals were not only dangerous and ill-advised, but pointless: "It is not clear to me what help his Majesty's Government expect to need from the population in Syria".⁴⁰

From Jerusalem, Sir Harold MacMichael sent an even stronger objection. He regarded the Catroux plan as shortsighted opportunism. The Free French were simply "concerned to outbid Vichy" and would impose a cynical treaty upon the Syrians. It would therefore be disastrous for Britain to be associated with the scheme.⁴¹ At the Foreign Office, MacMichael's views were briefly summarised:

He maintains that we ought to make no promises at all to any Syrian party and ought not even to associate ourselves with promises made by the Free French [because independence] would have to be qualified in such a way that the proposed solution would inevitably be rejected. 42

These objections were virtually ignored. The above minute was not even written until 10 March, by which time the die was cast, and British emissaries had approached the Syrians with the heady wine of national liberation and personal gain.

Meanwhile Catroux himself had readjusted his Syrian time-tables. While informing de Gaulle that "France will only maintain herself in the Levant after the war... on basis of a grant of political independence and conclusion of a treaty of alliance", he explained that no open declaration on Syrian independence could yet be made. It would only

provoke excitement and possibly trouble in the Levant which we would not be in a position either to appease or to control against which the army and the authorities would form a bloc, and which would risk exploitation either by Iraq or Turkey.

Moreover, it might create trouble on the Palestinian border at a time when Wavell was "elsewhere engaged". In the light of all this, Catroux concluded, it was necessary "to temporize until the situation is more favourable".⁴³

The military situation certainly demanded a moratorium on the public side of Catroux's plan. Even as Catroux wrote, British forces were in full cry across Libya, hounding the bewildered Italian army. It was no time to create disorder in the rear or confront the Army of the Levant. This was readily appreciated in the Foreign Office, where Crosthwaite minuted that "Wavell is probably right in thinking that a public declaration about Syria might cause trouble there. We obviously do not want that until we are in a position to exploit it".⁴⁴

Nevertheless it was hoped that the Cairo authorities would "get ahead now with winning over Syrian support on rather

less spectacular lines".⁴⁵ However this plan, although accepted in principle, was set aside while Catroux made one more attempt to resurrect the dead: on 31 January he wrote to the new High Commissioner in Beirut, General Dentz - a former intelligence officer in the Levant, a bitter Anglophobe and a confirmed Pétainist. To this unlikely soul Catroux addressed an appeal to rejoin the Allies, (i.e., Britain and Free France), on the understanding that French rights in the Levant would be guaranteed and the Free French would keep out.⁴⁶ It was an exercise in futility. Dentz regarded the Free French as traitors and rebels who represented "all that which has killed us: Democratic-Masonic politics and Judeo-Saxon finance".⁴⁷

Catroux's appeal had not been made in isolation. Attempts were being made at that time to win over Weygand himself, now in command of French North Africa. Hence the decision to postpone any approach to the Syrians in case the French proconsuls were prepared to do a deal. It was a forlorn hope, but until the Vichy door was slammed in their faces, the Cairo authorities were bound to postpone the nationalist tactic. Late in January, Catroux, Wavell and Lampson had therefore agreed not to pursue conversations with the Syrians until Weygand's stance was established, since this might provoke unnecessary trouble for Dentz in Syria.⁴⁸

* * *

It was soon clear that neither Weygand nor Dentz would co-operate, which left Cairo free to pursue its second alternative - to invoke Syrian nationalism and raise a fifth column against the Army of the Levant. The Crosthwaite telegram was therefore dusted off and its proposals were revived. These were to pursue discussions with Syrian émigrés in Iraq and if possible "to establish contact with other elements in Syria, in particular the Druzes". Some ground work had already been done on the first of these proposals.

As early as 14 December Crosthwaite was aware that the Baghdad Embassy had been in touch with the Syrian leader Jamil Mardam.⁴⁹ These contacts were now followed up and continued until Operation Exporter.⁵⁰

At the same time action was initiated on the second proposal, to approach "other elements in Syria", and it was here that something went very badly wrong. This indeed was the most dubious aspect of the Crosthwaite telegram. It was proposed to seek out the Druzes, a formidable people who had offered prolonged and bloody resistance to French rule. They occupied the rugged hills of the Jebel Druze, an area which, to the exasperation of French and British mandatory officials, overlapped the border of Trans-jordan. It was inhospitable territory, and only 15 years had passed since the Druzes had destroyed a French column 3,000 strong. It had taken General Gamelin two months and another 7,000 troops to relieve Suweida, on the western edge of the Jebel Druze.⁵¹

It was now proposed that this fiercely independent people be approached for support against the Army of the Levant. This must have been quite a pill for Catroux to swallow. Yet from the military point of view, such an approach was needed before the commencement of Operation Exporter:

if the [Allied] forces were to make straight for Damascus, the Druze mountains would be behind their right flank and rear. If the Druzes were hostile, they would be in a position to attack the communications of the force advancing on Damascus. 52

In view of the Druzes' recent performances against Western troops, no force advancing northwards towards Damascus could afford to ignore them. To make a serious bid for Syria implied, therefore, making some arrangement with the Druzes. Catroux may have felt uncomfortable about this, but he could hardly evade the means required to achieve his own ends.

In February 1941 the die was cast. Emissaries were sent to those "other elements in Syria". Kirkbride himself went to the Druzes, while Major John B. Glubb, Commander of Trans-jordan's Arab Legion, crossed the border and "opened communications with the tribes on the east of the line Hama-Homs-Damascus".⁵³ It is still not clear whether Catroux fully accepted this scheme in the first place, although he accepted the approach to the Syrian emigrés in Iraq. And there is no evidence that Catroux was specifically informed of the instructions given to Kirkbride and Glubb.

What is clear, up to this point, is that no British authority was consciously pursuing measures designed to evict France from the Levant. In London the Colonial Office was acting as the junior partner to the Foreign Office, which had asked for Catroux's reactions to its suggestions. At the very worst, the Foreign Office was doing no more than encouraging the Free French to belatedly bless the 1936 Franco-Syrian treaty, which was modelled on the Anglo-Egyptian treaty. But Crosthwaite and his superiors, remote from the cut and thrust of Syrian affairs, assumed that Catroux meant to grant some meaningful independence to the Levant States, and that the local peoples would really consider this sufficient. On the basis of these dubious assumptions it was thought that Britain could be accepted as a kind of midwife at the birth of Syrian independence.⁵⁴

By February 1941 aspects of the Crosthwaite telegram had evolved into the mission of Glubb and Kirkbride, and at this point there occurred the first of many disastrous episodes in Anglo-Free French relations. For while these men largely succeeded in winning the active support of the Druzes and the tribesmen, they did so by carrying out anti-French propaganda in which no distinction was drawn between Vichy and Free France, and by suggesting that Britain would temporarily govern Syria until peace and independence were realised. They therefore gained Syrian support

at a price which was intolerable to Free France.

According to Glubb, this was all an honest mistake. Although he and Kirkbride had long been accused of intriguing against the French, Glubb claims that even after the Vichy-German armistice they had "abstained scrupulously from interference in Syria".⁵⁵ Kirkbride also refers to French suspicions, attributing these to a combination of French paranoia and the persistent intrigues of the Emir Abdullah.⁵⁶

Both Glubb and Kirkbride say that they had always kept out of the internal affairs of Syria and confined themselves to such wholesome forays as calling on the French Governor of the Jebel Druze.⁵⁷ Until February 1941. "Then suddenly", wrote Glubb,

we received secret instructions from England reversing the situation. We were told to place ourselves in touch with the people of Syria.... Money was placed at our disposal for this purpose. It was agreed that Kirkbride should deal with the Druzes and I with the Syrian tribes. 58.

Both men absorbed this complete reversal of policy and energetically carried out their orders. "I knew most of the Druze leaders personally", wrote Kirkbride, and "not only was their neutrality assured but arrangements were made which resulted in most of... the Druze irregular cavalry coming over to our side as soon as hostilities in Syria commenced".⁵⁹ The Syrian tribesmen also responded well to the overtures of Major Glubb.

Apart from financial inducements, Kirkbride and Glubb undoubtedly owed their success to bald anti-French propaganda which has been nicely summarised by Glubb himself:

The Arabs for 25 years past had resented the presence of the French in Syria, but the alliance between France and Britain had made it impossible to oust them. Now by a fortunate coincidence, as it appeared to the Arabs, the British and French were on opposite sides. The hour for the redemption of Syria had struck. 60

In this simple gospel of national deliverance there was no room for fine distinctions between Vichy and Free Frenchmen. Indeed, as Glubb rightly remarks, "the difference between the two was one affecting their attitude towards Germany, and was a matter of indifference to the Syrians".⁶¹ Nevertheless, the Glubb-Kirkbride propaganda was a serious distortion of London's intentions, for it completely eliminated the Free French from Syrian affairs, and implied that the Levant States would owe their independence purely to the British.

When these activities came to light, the most acrimonious dispute flared up between the British and Free French. De Gaulle, citing Glubb's activities and the recruitment of the Druzes, declared that Britain was playing a game

settled in London by firmly established services, carried out on the spot by a team without scruples but not without resources, accepted by the Foreign Office... and supported by the Prime Minister.... British policy [was] to replace France at Damascus and at Beirut. 62

The activities of Kirkbride and Glubb certainly gave this impression. Yet it is now clear that when they received their instructions London was pursuing no such policy.

What went wrong? Glubb himself has offered an explanation which once seemed perfectly reasonable, given the considerable incompetence and confusion in Cairo:

In the preparatory work undertaken before the invasion of Syria, it had been assumed by one and all that French control of Syria was at an end.... It was just one more of those misunderstandings.... Presumably in London the Free French had been promised the control of Syria.... Apparently the commanders in the Middle East were not aware of the promise. Certain it is that no mention of it was made to us. [Hence] propaganda inevitably took the form of the liberation of Syria from French control. 63

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On second thoughts, however, this statement merely deepens the mystery. It also clouds the issue by referring to some specific promise, as though control of Syria was ever disputed. In the end British forces were employed only because all possibilities short of invasion had been exhausted and the Free French alone were too weak to defeat the Army of the Levant. But there was never any dispute about who would govern a liberated Syria. Free French intentions were clear all along, and British acceptance of them was the pre-condition for Catroux's presence in Wavell's bailiwick.

The most controversial feature of Glubb's explanation is, however, the clear implication that he and Kirkbride were unaware of Free French intentions and were not informed that the Free French would govern Syria after the campaign. The trouble with this claim is that Catroux's intentions were certainly known to Kirkbride. He had been present three months earlier when Catroux had confided his plans to MacMichael.⁶⁴ Kirkbride himself says that prior to the invasion he was given

two preparatory tasks, (a) to contact the leaders of the Druze community... and (b) to assist General Catroux... to get into touch with certain French officers in Syria who were believed to have Gaullist sympathies.

Ironically enough, he described Catroux as "impressive, with sound ideas".⁶⁵

Kirkbride knew that Catroux was bound for Damascus and that his destination had been agreed in London. Glubb's assertion that "no mention of it was made to us" is therefore highly ambiguous. It is unlikely that Glubb himself was unaware of the Free French scheme. It would appear that he learned from Kirkbride what Catroux had confided in Jerusalem three months earlier. When recently reminded of this Jerusalem meeting, he said

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I did hear something about that. Catroux was proposing to beguile the Syrians! I must admit we felt a great resentment. It seemed like 1920 all over again - another double-cross.

It is also apparent that Glubb and Kirkbride discussed their instructions in February 1941, for the division of labour (Glubb to the tribesmen, Kirkbride to the Druzes) was "a commonsense arrangement between us", according to Glubb.⁶⁶

Kirkbride and Glubb were not unaware that the Free French intended to control Syria as soon as the Vichy authorities were unseated. Yet this was consciously omitted from their message, for they carried out anti-French propaganda which made no exception of Free France, and in effect they represented Britain as the sole liberator of Syria.

It is difficult to find a satisfactory explanation for this episode. To the Gaullists, unable to reconcile Foreign Office assurances with the behaviour of British agents in Syria, it was simply proof of "an English policy of encroachments on our domain".⁶⁷ It was perhaps inevitable that the Free French should draw this conclusion. They were nevertheless mistaken, for the Glubb-Kirkbride propaganda was a serious distortion of the Crosthwaite proposals. A more complex explanation is required, and although some evidence is still withheld, the general outlines are already clear. They throw light on this and many subsequent misunderstandings in the Levant. Ultimately the answer lies as much in the confused nature of the British presence in the Arab world, as in the attitudes of Glubb and Kirkbride.

Whitehall did not have a simple grasp of the situation in the Middle East. Since 1914 it had become entangled in a web of contradictions. Britain's Arab empire was now an amorphous mosaic of mandates and 'alliances' run by different London bureaucracies. Moreover, Britain was floundering in a morass of tribal, pan-Arab and Zionist aspirations. As a result, British 'policy' was a polite

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term for a daily balancing act. With no distinct goal - in an area seething with contradictory aims - British policy had a Galilean flavour: "sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof". As an exasperated Whitehall official wrote in 1941, the British should have been

taking Palestine, Transjordan, Syria and the Lebanon as the unit, and trying to clear our ideas as to what the future of those territories ought to be. We must try to devise some practicable ultimate aim towards which British policy should be directed. When we know what we want [!], we shall have a clearer idea of what our day to day, or month to month, policy should be... 68

This state of affairs - a presence in search of a purpose - meant that undue powers and initiatives had devolved upon Britain's local representatives. When war came again to the Middle East, these responsibilities were increased by the obvious need for action relevant to the flow of events, for few military actions were without some political significance. Thus in the administration of Middle Eastern territories, the regional tail often wagged the metropolitan dog. This centrifugal tendency was strengthened when Whitehall officials proved inadequate. A case in point was C.W. Baxter, who was "useless as Head of Eastern Department" and "a bone-head" according to one Foreign Office mandarin, while Spears called him "the wettest thing I have ever come across".⁶⁹

The subtle shift in responsibilities from Whitehall to various Middle Eastern centres was aided by the unwieldy organisation of Britain's Arab empire. As mandates, Palestine and Transjordan came under the jurisdiction of the Colonial Office. The former was governed by the High Commissioner, the latter carefully monitored by his subordinate Kirkbride, who was attached to the government of Abdullah. Egypt and Iraq, the 'independent' allies of Great Britain, were politically garrisoned by ambassadors reporting to the Foreign Office. Under war conditions, such disguised imperialism gave these diplomats enormous responsibilities.

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This patchwork administration of the Middle East made a distinct and unified British policy even more unlikely, leaving more initiative in the hands of the men on the spot, and encouraging local interpretations of British policy and interests in the Middle East. "There are too many would-be Lawrences in these parts", observed Spears in 1941, only to become one himself.⁷⁰

Finally, the war situation superimposed upon this political mosaic a unified command which pursued its regional military purposes. Military strategy often had the most profound political repercussions, but it constantly outreached any single civilian authority in the Middle East.* Politico-military liaison - never a happy affair - was hopeless when a centralised military headquarters was expected to deal with a battery of ambassadors, high commissioners and residents reporting to separate departments in London. Soldiers became policy-makers in such circumstances:

the result of unevenly divided responsibilities was that the military were forever tempted, and seldom resisted the temptation, to formulate policy in spheres quite beyond military responsibility. This tendency was accentuated by the growth of all sorts of Intelligence services [which] tended to suggest policies of their own... 71

It is against this background that we must account for the activities of Glubb and Kirkbride. To begin with, it is apparent that Glubb's "secret instructions" did not come directly "from England" at all.⁷² In London the matter was controlled by the Foreign Office, which had already shot its bolt - the Crosthwaite telegram. This had been shelved in Cairo while overtures were made to Dentz and Weygand. "In view of the reply from Cairo", minuted Crosthwaite on 8 March, "we decided for the time being to hold our hand".⁷³ Yet Glubb's instructions were received in the latter half of February.⁷⁴ They certainly did not come from England.

* Churchill attempted to correct this situation in July 1941 by the appointment of a Minister of State to represent the War Cabinet in the Middle East.

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With the shelving of the Crosthwaite proposals, Cairo had taken the lead, and far away in the Foreign Office Baxter eventually recorded that

The latest proposals from Cairo...are that we should try to keep the Syrian parties in play by doling out a little money all round, but should avoid entering into any political commitments... 75

The matter was being left to Wavell, Lampson and Catroux. Although there was nothing in the "latest proposals" to which Catroux really objected, it is not hard to see how they could have inspired the orders given to Kirkbride and Glubb. Without alerting the Vichy authorities, they brought certain Syrian parties into play, distributed money and - only too well! - avoided political commitments.

In their memoirs, Glubb and Kirkbride indicate that their orders came from the military authorities. Thus, as the Druzes were a potential military threat, "Kirkbride undertook to establish relations with the Druze leaders in order to prevent such an eventuality".⁷⁶ They were certainly in a receptive mood. "The Druze have been active of late", reported Kirkbride himself in January, "in angling for British intervention in Syria and for offers for the assistance of the Druze people in that eventuality".⁷⁷ Glubb's own orders also reflected a military purpose. As the leader of an allied force, Glubb had earlier suggested

that while the regular forces advanced directly upon Beirut and Damascus, another force should move up the Desert east of the Druze mountains.... The General Staff had already had the same idea. While, therefore, Kirkbride established relations with the Druzes, I opened communications with the tribes on the east of the line Hama-Homs-Damascus. 78

The implication of Glubb's whole account is that the February orders came from military authorities in Cairo. Kirkbride also attributes instigation and control of the venture to "General Headquarters".⁷⁹

The military origin of these orders throws some light on the mystery. The general liaison problem in the Middle East has already been noted, along with the tendency for various military authorities to overlook or encroach upon political areas. There was also the breezy assumption that Britain and Free France had synonymous objectives. Lastly there was the vast tangle of proliferating sub-sections within Middle East Command, wherein the left hand hardly knew what the right hand was doing. In the case of military Intelligence - and the Glubb-Kirkbride assignment clearly belonged in this category - this was especially true. Under these circumstances it was only too easy for orders to be issued which, through ignorance or indifference or even maverick intent, brushed aside Free French aims in Syria. General Headquarters at this time was noted for its serious inefficiencies and lack of co-ordination.

As a result Glubb and Kirkbride were permitted to take no account of the Free French position and to contradict the policy of co-operation implied by Catroux's position in Cairo. They had the freedom to use the most locally effective line of propaganda, which was "the liberation of Syria from French control".⁸⁰ This, and the considerable sums of money which they distributed, clinched the support of the Druzes and the desert tribesmen: "the work was done mainly by persuasion", Kirkbride insisted, "but General Headquarters seemed to consider that bribery was necessary, and rather against my will some 200,000 pounds were provided for distribution to the leaders".⁸¹

To the two Englishmen in Amman, this task was not unwelcome. Both Glubb and Kirkbride were keen Arabophiles. They had a genuine respect for Arab culture and civilisation, sympathy for Arab aspirations, and a belief that Britain could and should guide the Arabs through their transition from Ottoman bondage to modern independence. They were not proud of their government's earlier dealings with the French, which had led to the repressive French acquisition of Syria and Lebanon. They were incensed by Catroux's

plan to exploit Levant nationalism - with British collaboration - and looked on this scheme as a new betrayal of Arab aspirations.

Accordingly Glubb and Kirkbride must have considered their instructions with great satisfaction. There were no Vichy/Gaullist distinctions, no stipulations about a Free French administration. By simply carrying out their orders, therefore, they were opposing Free French designs.* In the absence of political guidelines, their anti-French propaganda was the most effective interpretation of their immediate task. If these orders were injurious to Free French plans, of which they happened to have first-hand knowledge, this was not their fault. They could safely argue that in the absence of distinct instructions they were not bound to snatch Catroux's chestnuts out of the fire. Besides, what could they hope to achieve across the border if they merely announced the imminent replacement of one set of Frenchmen by another? Vichy/Gaullist distinctions were patently meaningless to a Druze or a Bedouin. A clear path was open, and Glubb and Kirkbride took this path with a will.

The Glubb-Kirkbride affair was an ominous overture for Anglo-Free French relations in the Levant. It was also a disastrous by-product of Catroux's original idea of exploiting Syrian nationalism. In this sense his half-baked suggestion had already proved to be unhappy. Developed by Crosthwaite, volleyed back and forth by the Foreign and Colonial Office men, it was eventually lobbed into Wavell's court, where a very muddled game was in progress. As the idea circulated through Middle East Command, its Free French *raison d'être* was obscured. When the Glubb-Kirkbride instructions emerged in February 1941 they bore no resemblance to their Free French grandparent.

* Despite extensive searches, no trace of these orders has been found. Any such document in Cairo may have been destroyed on "Ash Wednesday" (1 July 1942). On that day, when Rommel seemed poised to take the Nile delta, the Cairo air was thick with the smoke of burning files hastily destroyed by the British authorities.

The Glubb-Kirkbride mission was distinctly useful when the time came to fight in Syria, but for Anglo-Free French relations it was a stumbling-block. Without frustrating Free French plans to control the Levant, it nourished the myth of a ubiquitous network of Arabophiles. Ironically it was not so much relentless British teamwork - as de Gaulle claimed - but the dilapidated machinery of British power in the Middle East which allowed such incidents to occur.

However, recriminations were all in the future. As the winter receded, Middle East Command seemed largely preoccupied with other theatres; Catroux bided his time, looking for some chink in Dentz's armour; and de Gaulle made the arduous journey from London to central Africa, and on to Khartoum and Cairo. With him came General Spears, whose first comments from Cairo were only too pertinent: "Lack of liaison in many directions strikes the observer here as being a serious evil", he told Churchill. "Good relations between individuals are no substitute for common policy served by united action".⁸²

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N O T E S

- 1 B.H. Liddell Hart, History of the Second World War (1970), p.109.
- 2 M.E. (O) (40) 21, 1 July 1940, CAB 95/1
- 3 Furlonge interview, 17 May 1978.
- 4 M.E. (O) (40) 26, 8 July 1940, CAB 95/1.
- 5 Churchill, ii.611.
- 6 Liddell Hart, p.118.
- 7 de Gaulle, i.87.
8. Major-General Sir Edward Spears, Fulfilment of a Mission (1977), p.14f; Spears letter, 10 April 1941, PREM 3 422/1.
- 9 de Gaulle, i.172, 177.
- 10 Spears, Fulfilment, p.30.
- 11 Lampson tel., 8 April 1941, PREM 3 422/14 and F0371/27321/E1364.
- 12 Général Catroux, Dans La Bataille de Méditerranée (1949), pp. 35, 58. At first Catroux went about under the name of Monsieur Chartier, a disguise exactingly maintained in such Foreign Office files as F0371/24592/E2980.
- 13 Churchill, ii.596.
- 14 de Gaulle, i.138.
- 15 Foreign Office tel., 28 September 1940, F0371/24592/E2700.
- 16 Catroux, p.33; H.M. Sachar, Europe Leaves the Middle East (1974), p.196.
- 17 de Gaulle, i.177; Woodward, i.562.
- 18 Havard tel., 12 October 1940, F0371/24594/E2774.
- 19 Spears, Fulfilment, p.8f.
- 20 Catroux, p.46.
- 21 Furlonge interview, 17 May 1978.
- 22 Spears Diary, 20 June 1941. This passage is reproduced with minor embellishments in Fulfilment, p.121.

- 23 de Gaulle, i.206.
- 24 F0371/24594/E2875.
- 25 Lampson tel., 3 November 1940, F0371/24594/E2875.
- 26 Catroux, p.45f.
- 27 MacMichael tel., 21 November 1940, F0371/24592/E2980.
- 28 Foreign Office memorandum, 1 July 1940, M.E.(O) (40) 21, CAB 95/1
- 29 Kirkbride, p.142f.
- 30 MacMichael tel., 1 July 1940, M.E.(O) (40) 24, CAB 95/1.
- 31 P.M. Crosthwaite minute, 6 December 1940, F0371/24592/E3103.
- 32 C.W. Baxter minute, 6 December 1940, Ibid.
- 33 Lampson tel., 21 December 1940, F0371/24595/E3084.
- 34 P.M. Crosthwaite minute, 24 December 1940, Ibid.
- 35 Sir Horace Seymour minute, 1 January 1941, F0371/24592/E3103.
- 36 Foreign Office approved draft tel., January 1941, F0371/24592/E3103. It is clear from cross references (F0371: 24592/E3103; 27293/E659; 27321/E116) that this telegram was sent by 10 January 1941. Unfortunately the actual telegram (No.30 to Cairo) is in E62 of F0371/27321. This, along with E727, E1231, E1243 and E1553 in the same piece, has been withheld for reasons best known to some benighted interpreter of the Public Records Act. (The same fate has descended on other F0371 pieces). Nevertheless it is clear from the state of the draft telegram and the other references that the approved draft became Foreign Office tel. No.30 to Cairo.
- 37 Lampson tel., 8 April 1941, PREM 3 422/14 and F0371/27321/E1346.
- 38 At this stage, Catroux's practice was to inform de Gaulle through the Foreign Office. The telegram on page 29 is typical.
- 39 Furlonge interview (ii), 2 June 1978.
- 40 Newton tel., 22 January 1941, F0371/27293/E659.
- 41 MacMichael tel., 28 January 1941, F0371/27293/E409.
- 42 Baxter minute, 10 March 1941, F0371/27293/E659.
- 43 Catroux tel., 7 January 1941, F0371/27321/E116.

- 44 Crosthwaite minute, 11 January 1941, Ibid.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 Catroux, pp.91-94; F0371/27293/E754.
- 47 Sachar, pp.197, 184.
- 48 Geoffrey Warner, Iraq and Syria 1941 (1974), p.71.
- 49 Crosthwaite minute, 14 December 1940, F0371/24592/E3103.
- 50 Lampson tel., 8 April 1941, PREM 3 422/14. EXPORTER was the code name for the Anglo-Free French invasion of the Levant in June 1941.
- 51 Lieutenant-General Sir J.B. Glubb, Britain and the Arabs, 1908-1958 (1959), p.114.
- 52 Lieutenant-General Sir J.B. Glubb, The Story of the Arab Legion (1948), p.308.
- 53 Ibid., p.307ff.: Kirkbride, p.147.
- 54 See for instance F0371/27346/E3226 where the Foreign Office approach is well illustrated by its prim reaction to a later hint by MacMichael that the Free French intended to double-cross the Syrians.
- 55 Glubb, Arab Legion, p.307.
- 56 Kirkbride, p.142f.
- 57 Interview with Sir John Glubb, 9 August 1979; Kirkbride, p.114.
- 58 Glubb, Arab Legion, p.307.
- 59 Kirkbride, p.147.
- 60 Glubb, Arab Legion, p.311
- 61 Ibid., p.344.
- 62 de Gaulle, i.202, 188.
- 63 Glubb, Arab Legion, p.344f.
- 64 MacMichael tel., 21 November 1940, F0371/24592/E2980.
- 65 Kirkbride, pp.147, 149.
- 66 Glubb interview.
- 67 de Gaulle, i.205.

- 68 H.A. Caccia minute, 19 September 1941, CO831/59/77241.
- 69 Baron Harvey of Tasburgh Diary, 5 May, 14 September 1941. (Oliver Harvey was Principal Private Secretary to Eden at the Foreign Office from July 1941, and was Assistant Under-Secretary of State from 1943 to 1946. He was Ambassador to France from 1948 to 1954) Spears Diary, 25 June 1943.
- 70 Spears tel., 8 July 1941, SPRS IC/ii.
- 71 Spears, Fulfilment, p.20.
- 72 Glubb, Arab Legion, p.307.
- 73 FO371/27293/E659.
- 74 Earlier in February both Glubb and Kirkbride were far to the south as "guests of the Saudi Government at Moghaira", discussing frontier administration - Kirkbride, February report, CO831/58/77065. Unfortunately this report is not complete!
- 75 Baxter minute, 10 March 1941, FO371/27293/E659.
- 76 Glubb, Arab Legion, p.308f.
- 77 CO831/58/77065.
- 78 Glubb, Arab Legion, p.309
- 79 Kirkbride, p.147.
- 80 Glubb, Arab Legion, p.344f.
- 81 Kirkbride, p.147.
- 82 Spears tel., 9 April 1941, SPRS II/7.

if the Germans can pick up Syria and Iraq with petty air forces, tourists and local revolts we must not shrink from running equal small-scale military risks, and facing the possible aggravation of political dangers... Churchill*

The harder you strike at Vichy, the more necessary it is to safeguard the interests and feelings of France. de Gaulle +

De Gaulle and Spears arrived in Cairo on the first day of April 1941 - a critical month for British fortunes in the Mediterranean and Middle East. On the very next day there was an anti-British coup in Iraq. On the third, Rommel took Benghazi. Three days later the Germans invaded Greece and began to overpower its British defenders. By 11 April Rommel had driven Wavell's forces out of Libya and was menacing Egypt. The whole perimeter was shrinking rapidly, and in the rear the Iraqi coup raised the spectre of Arab disaffection and insurrection.

With these heavy anxieties Wavell had little time or desire to ponder the Syrian question. This did not deter the single-minded de Gaulle, who raised the matter on every possible occasion. For the Free French leader, there was no more vital subject than the Levant. De Gaulle was not unaware of Wavell's difficulties, and privately sympathised with the hard-pressed Commander-in-Chief.¹ Nevertheless he considered that it was only by rocking the boat that he could get anything done, for at that time Free French prospects in the Levant looked particularly bleak.

A sort of laissez-faire atmosphere seemed to have evolved between Damascus and Cairo, and this naturally left the Free French cause in the doldrums. Dentz, like Wavell, had quite enough problems to handle, and neither man wanted trouble on the Palestinian border.

* Churchill telegram to Wavell, 21 May 1941, PREM 3 422/6.

+ message to Churchill in Spears tel., 6 June 1941, PREM 3 422/6.

The Vichy High Commissioner, walking the tightrope of neutrality, had had a difficult winter. He had endured on one hand a stream of British and Free French propaganda, and the economic hardships of a British naval blockade. On the other hand he had been afflicted by the presence of Otto Werner von Hentig, Ribbentrop's specialist in Arab affairs, who had exceeded his fact-finding brief and blatantly courted the nationalists in the Levant States. For the benefit of Arab leaders Hentig screened the film Sieg im Western, on the German conquest of France, and suggested that the French mandate was as defunct as the League of Nations. He went on to raise the possibility of a new Arab Empire, and among other things spread the rumour that 20,000 French refugees were to be settled on lands which would be taken from the Syrians.²

Dentz was fully aware of these activities and was not slow to blame Hentig when anti-Vichy demonstrations began in Damascus at the end of February - shortly after Hentig's departure. The disturbances were sparked off by the food crisis and inflation, but when nationalists called a general strike in Syria and Lebanon, political issues began to take precedence. Faced by demands for the return of representative government and the resurrection of the Franco-Syrian treaty of 1936, Dentz was forced in mid-March to negotiate with the nationalists. Early in April he established a facade of representative government in the Levant States in an effort to defuse the political issue.³

The embattled Frenchman was inclined to blame the Germans for the crisis, and on 5 March he voiced his suspicions to the American Consul General in Beirut, who commented that "six weeks ago Dentz would not have mentioned the Germans at all or would have accused the British of fomenting the disturbances." In the face of Hentig's blatant subversion of French mandatory authority, and the extensive German propaganda and espionage network in the Levant, Dentz continued to blame the political crisis on the Germans.⁴

This situation led to a modest détente between Dentz and Wavell, for the latter was by no means pleased with the upheaval in the Levant. While British forces were away in Greece, Wavell wanted no emergency on the Palestine border. The Cairo authorities therefore decided to relax the British blockade and alleviate a situation which in their opinion could only be exploited by the Germans. On 19 March the economic blockade was lifted. Further steps were taken to assure more adequate food supplies for the Levant, and by the end of April a commercial treaty had been concluded with Dentz.⁵ Rommel's advance through Cyrenaica added more weight to Wavell's argument that he could not afford to have a Syrian crisis on his hands. "Syria is most perplexing", Lampson told Churchill on 8 April:

The trouble is that... we do not at present want disturbance there which might call for British troops so badly needed elsewhere. Wavell, Catroux and I are therefore agreed that we should play for time by offering a barter agreement, try to keep the Arab leaders quiet by money and advice and letting the French authorities know that we are out to help them keep order.⁶

This was a remarkable volte-face. Catroux's original idea had been to foment and exploit disorder in the Levant to achieve a Free French takeover. He had now conceded that this was untimely, and that for the moment Dentz was not to be troubled. Lampson's telegram continued:

Wavell and I have for some time favoured a declaration by de Gaulle and Catroux at an opportune moment in favour of Syrian independence after the war.... Catroux felt this should be made from strength and not from weakness and that we should wait until we can spare troops from Palestine perhaps in a few months time...

In putting the Wavell argument into Catroux's mouth, Lampson was employing a certain artistic licence, for Catroux was accepting a fait accompli.

De Gaulle and Spears were accepting no such thing. As Lampson admitted, de Gaulle "evidently wishes a more active policy [but] possibility of spontaneous movement from inside in favour of Free French has been extremely remote for some time past."⁷ This was almost certainly the case, but it was hotly disputed by de Gaulle and Spears.

On 10 April Spears sent a long report to Churchill, wildly claiming that "Seventy per cent of the junior officers and N.C.O's are said to be inclined towards the Free French movement".⁸ From a Free French point of view, de Gaulle simply could not afford to accept Wavell's position on Syria. Free France sorely needed the Levant and its French soldiers, but Wavell's policy could only consolidate the Vichy position there. This might give British forces a breathing space to deal with Axis troops in Greece and Libya, but it could also mean that the Levant would be lost to Free France.

Behind this immediate Free French need there was an even more fundamental concern in the far-ranging mind of de Gaulle. This was that the whole French position in the Levant could be frittered away if the States were left in Vichy hands much longer. Dentz was already in deep trouble with the resurgent nationalists, who found it doubly irksome to be subjects of a defeated and impotent nation. Worse still, the Vichy regime seemed to be allowing the Nazis a free hand to undermine the Idea of the French mandate, and to openly confront Arab leaders with the humiliating anomaly of being ruled by defeated foreigners. If this state of affairs continued, it could only be a matter of time before France was evicted from the Levant altogether.

First and foremost a French patriot, de Gaulle strained at the leash in his anxiety to reach Beirut and Damascus, stop the rot, patch up the French image and reassert France's "historic mission" in the Levant. It was at this time that de Gaulle's long-range Syrian objective first became evident to Spears, a relatively uncomplicated win-the-war man. The Englishman now began to see that while de Gaulle "realized the great importance of this theatre in the strategy of the war...what he was really concerned about was the political future of the States under French mandate."⁹ It was one of the first signs of a great gulf which was to separate the two men forever. Yet for the moment they were a formidable

combination and a thorn in the side of Wavell's staff. De Gaulle's ultimate motivation may have been the resurgence of France as a world power, but he shared with Spears an immediate concern for the success of Free France in the Levant and against the Axis. Spears therefore provided robust support as the Frenchman summoned every available argument against Cairo's prevailing policy of delay.

* * *

The most powerful argument was that "it was essential to ensure that the Vichy Government did not have it within its power to allow the Germans to get a grip on the Middle East". If, for instance, the Luftwaffe gained the use of Syrian and Lebanese aerodromes, the whole British position in Egypt could be made untenable, and both the Suez canal and the Mediterranean lost. Wavell was not unaware of this gloomy possibility, but without the resources to take Syria, he believed that to aggravate Dentz's problems would be to play the Germans' game for them, since Hentig and his ilk were clearly bent on exploiting the trouble between Dentz and the nationalists. Therefore Dentz's hand had to be strengthened rather than weakened by British actions.

De Gaulle was not impressed by this reasoning. In his view it rested on the fallacious assumption that Dentz, and the Pétain government, could be relied upon to stand up to the Germans and observe a genuine neutrality. But de Gaulle asserted that "Dentz would get what he could and give nothing in return" and could only be relied upon to carry out the orders of the Vichy government, which was all too vulnerable to German pressure. The current economic and political appeasement of Dentz could therefore guarantee nothing. Only a Free French takeover in the Levant could guarantee that the pass would not be sold to the Axis.¹⁰

De Gaulle's conclusion was simple. If there was a real danger of losing all by doing nothing then the allies had little to lose by a bold gamble. He "believed he could rally the French in the Levant provided he was helped to carry out his propaganda and his agents were given facilities and the movement of Vichy troops

into Palestine, both singly and in large bodies, was encouraged..."¹¹
 Spears endorsed de Gaulle's argument and fully agreed that the risk was worth it. His report to Churchill concluded that "we ought, even at some risk, to endeavour to rally Syria to the Free French cause. It is only when this occurs that we can hope to have achieved security for ourselves in Syria".¹²

There was some weight in the de Gaulle-Spears contention that Vichy neutrality was a false refuge, and two more forceful advocates could not have been found in all the Middle East. They certainly overwhelmed the comparatively invertebrate Catroux, who soon found himself running with the hare and hunting with the hounds. Catroux had reluctantly bowed to Wavell's assertion that for the time being nothing could be done about Syria, only to find his formidable chief taking up the cause which he had temporarily abandoned. Under this stiffening influence he began to find his original voice again, and according to Spears he "echoed" de Gaulle's feeling that prompt action was required. On 5 April he even accompanied Spears to Jerusalem to press the argument upon MacMichael.¹³

Caught between his acceptance of Wavell's position and his Free French interests, Catroux had got himself hopelessly compromised by 15 April, when an Anglo-Free French conference was held on the Levant question. In the presence of Wavell, Longmore (RAF), de Gaulle, Catroux and Spears, Lampson called for details of the Free French plan. Catroux promptly replied that two British divisions (one mechanised) plus the Free French troops should forthwith concentrate on the Palestine border and advance into Syria! This ludicrous suggestion effectively ruined all that de Gaulle and Spears had been saying and invited the worst possible conclusions about Free French competence, for the requisite British divisions simply did not exist.

Spears was thunderstruck. The exasperated de Gaulle recovered himself sufficiently to say that British intervention at this point

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was undesirable since propaganda tactics and moral persuasion were required to rally French troops in the Levant, whereas an unprovoked British attack would certainly be resisted. All that he required from the British was a decision to resume the blockade and to present a stern face to Dentz. But Catroux's faux pas made it only too easy for the British to dismiss Free French submissions. The only glimmer of hope came in the remarks of Sir Arthur Longmore who expressed the RAF's anxiety that the Luftwaffe might be allowed landing rights in Syria.¹⁴

Discussion switched to Syrian and Lebanese attitudes, the recent concessions made by Dentz to the local nationalists, and whether Free France could match or surpass what Vichy had to offer the Syrian peoples.

De Gaulle, asked if he would make declaration in favour of Syrian independence answered such a declaration now would only show weakness since he was not in a position to enforce it. He was however prepared to make such a declaration safeguarding however strategic needs at the moment he took over control of Syria. 15

De Gaulle added that in any case the Arabs were unlikely to be impressed by Dentz's offers since similar promises in the past had come to nothing.* The meeting concluded with de Gaulle urging that Free French troops be concentrated in northern Palestine as an additional pressure on Dentz. 16

Later that day, Spears had a further discussion with Wavell on Syria. Intent on exploiting Longmore's useful remarks, Spears dwelt on the danger of enemy aircraft operating from Syrian aerodromes. He argued that "unless preparations were made immediately to deal with a possible landing of German aircraft in Syria, it might be impossible to retrieve the position". As a first step, Spears repeated de Gaulle's request for a Free French concentration in Palestine, asserting that it would be "obvious" to Dentz that they were there to combat any German landing in Syria.

* This could only refer to the ill-fated 1936 Treaty and was a remarkable admission from the man who was to say, with such indignation, that the word of France needed no guarantee. (See page 76).

Though too polite to point out that Dentz might reasonably draw darker conclusions, Wavell could not be shaken. Even Spears was forced to desist.¹⁷

Sensing the futility of any further representations in Wavell's stronghold, de Gaulle left Cairo the next day and returned to Brazzaville. Spears, who went with him, agreed that there was no point in repeating the same things to the same people any longer. "He believed...that he had done all he could to further his case in Cairo", wrote Spears. "Indeed it seemed to me his further presence would only tend to lead to friction". This was equally true for Spears himself, whose vigorous apologetics had aroused resentment at Wavell's headquarters.¹⁸

De Gaulle was confident that he had read Vichy aright, and that under German pressure they would soon be acting the Trojan Horse in Syria. On reaching Brazzaville, he told Churchill that the Syrian situation

is becoming bad from the Arab point of view, in co-ordination with the Arab agitation in Iraq.... Moreover, there is no reason not to expect the setting up of enemy air bases in Syria if the German offensive in the Middle East calls for it. I do not think that the policy of consolidating Vichy in Syria by concessions... is a good one. 19

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Ironically enough, events in Iraq and Syria were about to give fresh momentum to Free French hopes, to demolish the Cairo policy and to vindicate the Gaullist arguments that Dentz was unreliable and that enemy aircraft could operate from Vichy Syria. As a result Churchill and the War Cabinet were obliged to force a reversal of policy upon the reluctant Wavell. Laissez-faire attitudes were discarded as London decided to scrape up a motley invasion force and make a desperate bid to take the Levant.

This train of events was set off by the revolt in Iraq, a formally independent country still somewhat stifled by the British, her old mandatory rulers. The situation had become increasingly

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irksome to Iraqi nationalists and a storm had been brewing for years. In March 1940 Rashid Ali al-Gaylani became prime minister and implemented a distinctly independent policy. He refused to break off diplomatic relations with Italy and called for a revision of the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty by which Britain enjoyed a number of military and strategic privileges. At the same time he began to cultivate friendly communications with the Axis powers, and Baghdad became a centre for Axis intrigue and propaganda.

Tension increased throughout 1940 but the situation was temporarily alleviated by Rashid Ali's abrupt resignation on 31 January 1941. Although supported by an anti-British military cabal ("the Golden Square") he had not sufficiently carried cabinet and parliament with him in his hasty re-alignment of Iraq.

Rashid Ali was replaced by General Taha, who proved more susceptible to British pressure. In March 1941 his foreign minister (Tawfiq as-Suwaydi) was summoned to Cairo, to be sternly told by Eden himself that "Great Britain required a more co-operative attitude, and in particular, the immediate breaking off of relations with Italy".²⁰ Evidently affected by the Head Prefect's homily, Tawfiq went home and persuaded Taha to suppress the Golden Square. This move backfired disastrously and the defiance of the Golden Square developed into a coup d'état which swept Rashid Ali back into power on 3 April, at the head of a "Government of National Defence".

Both Britain and the Axis were caught off balance by these events. The British were naturally inclined to regard its coincidence with German attacks in Libya and Greece as proof of a concerted plan, but from an Axis point of view Rashid Ali had jumped the gun, and would just have to cope with any British reaction as best he could. So unexpected was the coup that the new British ambassador, Sir Kinahan Cornwallis, arrived in Baghdad on the very day that Rashid Ali assumed power. The latter strengthened his position by an astute constitutional charade which included a pledge to abide by the Anglo-Iraqi treaty.

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Britain's response eventually took the form suggested by Cornwallis, which was to call Rashid Ali's bluff. Cornwallis informed him that, in accordance with the Treaty, Britain wished to land a considerable force of troops at Basra, on the Persian gulf, and move them through to Palestine to reinforce Wavell's position. At the same time Rashid Ali was assured that London would recognise his new government in the wake of such genuine respect for Britain's Treaty rights. On the other hand an Iraqi refusal would violate the treaty and justify a drastic military response by the British, who would then have fresh troops on the spot.

Appreciating this neat dilemma, the Iraqi cabinet agreed to co-operate, and a convoy of Indian troops disembarked at Basra on 19 April. At this point Rashid Ali turned the spotlight on British intentions by requesting that troops be moved rapidly through the country and that no large concentration of British ground troops in Iraq be allowed. This request was brushed aside. Rashid Ali retaliated on 28 April by refusing permission for a second troop convoy to disembark at Basra. The Anglo-Iraqi Treaty was now in shreds, and although the troops landed unopposed, Iraqi forces invested the RAF base at Habbaniya, in the Baghdad region. Fighting began there on 2 May with an RAF bombardment of the Iraqi positions, and the siege was soon abandoned. A week later the first German and Italian aircraft, refuelling in Syria and Lebanon en route, entered the fray. But there were never enough of them, and by the end of May the RAF was unchallenged over Baghdad.

With insufficient Axis support, Rashid Ali's venture succumbed to an old imperial pattern: dour defence by a beleaguered garrison, the arrival of a relieving force, the collapse of the revolt. In this case the decisive relief came from the meagre resources of Middle East Command, while the Indian troops held a bridgehead at Basra. "Habforce", a hastily-assembled Anglo-Arab column, crossed 500 miles of desert from Palestine and reached Habbaniya on 18 May. The RAF and the relief column were enough to tip the scales. By 30 May Habforce had fought its way to Baghdad

and Rashid Ali's supporters deserted him. As Churchill put it, "a friendly Government" was duly installed in Baghdad, which lost no time in breaking all ties with the Axis.²¹

By a narrow margin, the British had won the race for Iraq. Swift and determined action had broken Rashid Ali, whose Axis friends (pre-occupied with Greece, Crete and Libya) had contented themselves with limited air support. Such symbolic involvement had been a double blunder. The Axis had not only lost face in the Arab world; worse still, their form of assistance had disastrously compromised Vichy Syria. This caused a reversal of British policy there in favour of the Gaullist line and led to another improvised invasion which toppled Dentz and - at last! - brought the Free French to the Levant.

Well before dawn on 8 May 1941 Geoffrey Furlonge, a British consular official in the Lebanon, was disturbed by the sound of aircraft overhead - flying east. At that hour Furlonge was able to evade the usual telephone control and call Jerusalem, alerting British headquarters. It was the first of many reports which reached the British concerning Axis aircraft in Syria. The RAF soon confirmed the presence of the Luftwaffe on Syrian and Lebanese airfields.²² The Germans, it seemed, were at the back door - and Vichy was holding it open for them.

The "appeasement" of Dentz, and Foreign Office hopes that it might secure a stable and neutral Syria, had been futile.²³ From Cairo, Spears* fired off a stinging reproach to Eden: "At your end are the Vichy fans, the Darlan backers, the Trust Dentz boys... still the oracles they were when I left ?".²⁴ And in response to the final straw being clutched at in Cairo - Dentz's reported readiness to resist German landings - de Gaulle had roundly told Wavell that

To imagine that Dentz could give orders for resistance to the Germans is a pure illusion. Dentz will not make a stand against Vichy, and the arrival of the Germans in Syria, if it occurs, will take place by collaboration between Vichy and the Germans. 25

*Spears was back in Cairo on 3 May, while de Gaulle returned on the 25th.

The illusion of Vichy neutrality did not last long. On 3 May the American ambassador in Vichy had approached Marshal Pétain on behalf of the British, and was told that "collaboration by France" would not go "beyond the requirements of the armistice agreement".²⁶ This assurance was meaningless, for that very day the German ambassador, Abetz, suddenly asked that German planes be allowed to land in Syria en route to Iraq. Under pressure to help Rashid Ali, the Germans were passing on the pressure to Pétain. Vichy sought to make a virtue out of its dismal necessity, and in return for stopover facilities in Syria, Darlan extracted several concessions from Abetz, including the liberation of French prisoners and the reduction of occupation forces in France. To gain these points, Darlan threw in an undertaking to defend Syria in the event of a British attack. The essence of the matter was settled between Darlan and Abetz on 4 May. Formal details and further negotiations followed quickly, culminating in Darlan's discussions with Hitler and Ribbentrop in Berchtesgaden.²⁷

Meanwhile the buck had been passed on to the unlucky Dentz, who had just announced his readiness to resist a German landing in Syria.²⁸ On 4 May he was advised that German assistance to Rashid Ali was imminent:

If formations of German aircraft should seek to land on your airfields or should fly over your territory, it would be expedient to consider that France is not in the position of a neutral power with respect to Germany. 29

In the face of this oblique advice Dentz was at first inclined to stick to his guns, and replied accordingly. There was a quick and unambiguous response from the Vichy war minister:

In the event of overflight by German or Italian planes, abstain from any counteraction. If certain of these planes land at your air-bases, let them.... British planes may on the contrary be attacked by all means.

This was followed up on 6 May by an order from Darlan to give the German aircraft "every facility". Dentz, the dutiful soldier, bowed to the inevitable. His obedience was soon reinforced by more detailed explanations and instructions from both Darlan and Pétain.³⁰

* * *

At Middle East Command, the hard-pressed Wavell was now confronted with an additional crisis. The Syrian question had come to the fore just as he was preparing the defence of Crete, a

counter-attack in Cyrenaica, and the relief of Habbaniyah and Baghdad. Strained to the limit by these endeavours, the British commander was now troubled by requests for action in Syria. On 27 April the Chiefs of Staff, worried by the build-up of German airborne forces in the Aegean (which were actually destined for Crete), had asked what forces could be spared for Syria. Wavell had indicated that the cupboard was bare. A single brigade group could be provided if and only if he was not asked to provide troops for Iraq.

Bombarded on all fronts by requests for reinforcements and equipment, Wavell resolved not to take sides against arithmetic: he stubbornly repeated the unpleasant logistical facts and refused to be stampeded into Syria. On 4 May he bluntly told Spears and Catroux that "he had always been opposed to having anything to do with Iraq and that intervention in Syria meant dispersal of effort and therefore defeat".³¹

At a conference the next day Wavell stood his ground, despite the current report that Dentz was prepared to resist a German landing. In the light of this report Catroux wanted to contact Dentz and secure, if not his conversion to Free France, at least his co-operation against the common foe. If Dentz withdrew into the Lebanon, Catroux wanted to advance into the Syrian vacuum and rally all the Vichy troops he could find. Wavell was unimpressed. Catroux's suggestions still presupposed British manpower and equipment which the Commander-in-Chief could not and would not allocate to a Syrian campaign. He "reiterated that the loss of Syria would be better than the risk of being beaten in detail owing to our intervening with inadequate forces."

The conference began to tail off into separate and abstract utterances. Lampson spoke of the political impact on the Arab world of a German occupation of the Levant. Longmore painted a dark picture of Axis air superiority in the Middle East based on control of Syrian airfields. Spears strove to enlarge this theme,

arguing that the threat could only be averted by early and determined action on the ground, but Wavell had clearly become immune to Spears' intercessions. "Nothing was decided", wrote Spears. "It was extremely depressing".³²

For poor Catroux, convinced that his moment in Syria had come, the futility and inertia of this conference were too much. With great emotion he declared that he could not stand idly by while Syria was written off:

Catroux said [he] would present himself at frontier with Free French forces... and send a message to Vichy troops to following effect: "Join me in attacking invader. If you will not do so at least give me free passage to fight France's enemy. If you refuse to fight the Germans will you dare to fight us? Will you shoot Catroux?" The French will have tricolours on their chests.... 33

This melodramatic outburst had no visible effect other than embarrassment on Catroux's audience, and the Frenchman was soon to learn that his own countrymen would indeed fight him where they would not fight Germans. Nevertheless his appeal worked when the above telegram, reporting the conference from Spears' point of view, reached Churchill. In appealing to the Prime Minister over Wavell's head (and in effect behind his back), Spears had shrewdly predicted the response. Churchill was the last man who would abandon Syria to the Axis without a struggle, and he was incensed by Wavell's attitude.

Spears' timing was crucial, for the Prime Minister was still seething over a previous signal from Wavell suggesting that a military suppression of Rashid Ali was too risky and that Britain would just have to negotiate terms in Iraq. To Churchill this was rank defeatism. "I am deeply disturbed at General Wavell's attitude," he had told his Chiefs of Staff on 6 May. "He seems to have been taken as much by surprise on his eastern as he was on his western flank.... He gives me the impression of being tired out."³⁴

Hard on the heels of these sentiments came the Spears telegram, with more evidence of Wavell's misgivings and reluctance to run risks. Churchill's indignant reaction soon reached the Chiefs of Staff. "A supreme effort must be made to prevent the Germans getting a footing in Syria with small forces.... It is no use General Wavell being vexed at this disturbance on his eastern flanks. The Catroux plan should certainly not be excluded..."³⁵ The Prime Minister followed this up on 9 May with a signal to Wavell which marked a milestone in the long Free French trek towards Syria:

You will no doubt realise the grievous danger of Syria being captured by a few thousand Germans transported by air. [We] believe that Admiral Darlan has probably made some bargain to help the Germans get in there. In face of your evident feeling of lack of resources we can see no other course open than to furnish General Catroux with the necessary transport and let...his Free French do their best at the moment they deem suitable, the RAF acting against German landings. Any improvement you can make on this would be welcome. 36

The only improvement Wavell had in mind was the suspension of the whole quixotic adventure. He had more than enough trouble in mid-May: Operation Brevity, his makeshift offensive against Rommel, had just begun; the German assault on Crete was expected daily; and his relief column was fighting its way through Iraq against heavy numerical odds. Nevertheless the Syrian question was now exercising Churchill and the War Cabinet. London's attitude had become more crucial than Wavell's, and this shift marked the real turning-point for Free French ambitions. It was London, on 14 May, who authorised the bombing of Axis aircraft on Syrian airfields.

In the wake of Churchill's 9 May telegram, Wavell could no longer flatly reject Free French arguments and requests, although he remained convinced of the folly of this Syrian venture. In the hope, perhaps, that Churchill would lose interest in a Syrian fixture, Wavell attempted to play out the over without provoking any more bouncers. He politely received Catroux on 14 May and, in what Spears called "a most satisfactory interview", agreed that

General Catroux is to broadcast from Jerusalem informing the French in Syria of German penetration. His later propaganda will depend on circumstances.
 (2) Catroux is to prepare leaflets...to be dropped

over Syria. (3) The Free French... in Palestine will remain there. They are on the railway and can be moved to the frontier rapidly. In any case this is the only form of transport available. (4) Should the response to the propaganda be satisfactory, [Wavell] will give the Free French all the support he can in view of the circumstances at the time. 37

In reality, however, this was a change of tactics rather than attitude. All that Wavell had really conceded was an intensification of Free French propaganda. The maintenance of Free French troops in Palestine would if anything release some of his thinly-stretched British forces to bolster the internal security of Palestine while Habforce was away in Iraq. Wavell had even avoided committing any of his motorised transport. Any further effort on his part was pledged only if Catroux's propaganda succeeded, and Wavell privately considered this to be unlikely. This scepticism was in sharp contrast to Catroux's renewed optimism and excitement. "I am today addressing an appeal... by leaflets and by radio", he informed de Gaulle,

explaining to [the Army of the Levant] the dishonour of this assistance to the enemy, exhorting it to take up arms and letting it know that... I am at the gates of Syria with my troops to support it.38

Nevertheless, it was Catroux's impulsiveness which exposed Wavell's procrastination and brought down a Churchillian ultimatum to act against Vichy Syria or resign. On 18 May Catroux approached Wavell with "certain information" that Dentz was about to withdraw into the Lebanon and abandon Syria to the Germans. "He declared that the road to Damascus was open and that it was urgently necessary...to send a force into Syria immediately. He was most insistent that I should issue orders to this effect there and then", Wavell recalled. "I insisted on verification of the Free French information before acting on it".³⁹ Catroux, who was accompanied by Repiton (his informant from Jerusalem) and Spears, was most put out.

Wavell therefore agreed to discuss the matter again on the following morning.⁴⁰

The subsequent conference of 19 May was little more than a dismal variation of the 5 May meeting. Wavell (according to both Catroux and Spears) repeated his refusal to march into Syria forthwith, declaring that the German presence in the Levant did not "present an immediate or a mortal danger to Egypt" and that he was unwilling to intervene unless satisfied that most of the French troops would indeed change sides. This apparently unnerved Catroux, who was after all being held to his agreement of 14 May, and his response was lacklustre. That left Spears vigorously supporting a half-hearted plea - an experience he did not relish. His only ray of hope was the stance taken by Air Marshal Tedder, who said that "the possession of the Syrian platform would give the Axis powers aerial mastery of the Middle East".⁴¹ *

The main result of Catroux's dramatic "news" and Wavell's response was a further flurry of signals to London. Immediately after the morning conference, Tedder entered the lists with a wire to Portal, the RAF Chief of Staff, warning him that if "land action was not possible we had to face the probability of a considerable enemy air force operating from Syria".⁴² This effectively supported the signal which Spears had fired off the night before to Churchill and Eden: "We are surely not going to allow the Germans to take over Syria by default.... If the only troops available are the Free French, why not use them? What is the use of wondering whether the British might be more popular if there are no others? It is Hobson's choice".⁴³

In sharp contrast, Wavell had just told the Chiefs of Staff that the Free French alone would be quite inadequate and could only aggravate the situation. And since they were all he had for a Syrian venture now that he had despatched Habforce from Palestine, the whole idea was unrealistic: "Hope I shall not be landed with Syria commitment unless absolutely essential", Wavell pointedly

* Tedder had replaced Longmore as the RAF chief in the Middle East.

concluded. "Any force I could send now would be painfully reminiscent of Jameson Raid and might suffer similar fate".*

Although Wavell had sent this signal on the evening of 17 May, he was obliged to attend the morning conference on the 19th without the benefit of a reply, a fact which rendered the conference futile. Returning to his headquarters, Wavell found that there was still no reply from the Chiefs of Staff. He therefore requested an immediate decision from London. Was his own view to prevail, or should he accede to Free French wishes anyway?⁴⁴ In a subsequent wire he warned against any reliance on "vacuum that may be created by withdrawal of French into Lebanon, which now seems unlikely".⁴⁵

The long-awaited reply from the Chiefs of Staff crossed with Wavell's urgent query, and implicitly answered it. The answer astonished and upset Wavell:

It appears...that atmosphere is at present favourable. It will certainly deteriorate if we do nothing, and we should soon have the Germans in complete control of Syria with all that that entails....it appears to us that there is no option but to improvise the largest force that you can manage without prejudice to the security of the Western Desert, and be prepared to move into Syria at the earliest possible date. Whether the initial operation should be undertaken by British troops alone [or] an Anglo-French force or even by the Free French must be left to you.... 46

Wavell's additional query made no difference. On the 20th London confirmed that Catroux was to be given all possible assistance.⁴⁷

Wavell was not slow to infer how the Chiefs of Staff could possibly describe the situation as "favourable". "All reports from trustworthy sources...agree that effect of action by Free French alone likely to be failure", he retorted on 21 May, in a last attempt to procrastinate:

* This Boer War analogy recalled an abortive attempt by a small British force to foment a local uprising. The Jameson Raid was an embarrassing failure.

Am making preparations for combined British and French operation if situation favourable but you must trust my judgment in this matter or relieve me of command. I am not willing to accept that Catroux, de Gaulle or Spears should dictate action that is bound seriously to affect military situation in Middle East. 48

Wavell's superiors were taken aback by this angry ultimatum and appeared ready to back down. The unhappy Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Sir John Dill, conveyed this feeling to Churchill on the same day: "we must either allow Wavell to carry out the policy which he believes to be sound or relieve him of his command. My own feeling is that at this juncture we should trust Wavell. It is no time to make a change".⁴⁹

Churchill flatly disagreed, and he was clearly undismayed at the prospect of losing Wavell. Exasperated by all the dithering over Iraq and Syria and humiliated by the collapse of his beloved Greek adventure, Churchill was already considering Wavell's replacement, and now he was stung by the allegation that the Free French were calling the tune in London. The Prime Minister's pugnacious stance carried the day, and he fired off a stiff rebuke to Wavell. "You are wrong in supposing that policy [decided by Chiefs of Staff] arose out of any representations made by the Free French leaders", he declared, baldly omitting Spears: "It arises entirely from the view taken here by those who have the supreme direction of war and policy in all theatres". The reprimand continued :

Our view is that if the Germans can pick up Syria and Iraq with petty air forces, tourists and local revolts we must not shrink from running equal small scale military risks, and facing the possible aggravation of political dangers from failure. For this decision we of course take full responsibility, and should you find yourself unwilling to give effect to it arrangements will be made to meet any wish you may express to be relieved of your command. 50

* Churchill elsewhere admitted that Wavell had cause for complaint about Spears' telegrams. See Appendix A.

The dispute ended with this ultimatum. Wavell accepted the position and prepared to enter Syria, knowing that Catroux's "armed political inroad" (as Churchill fancifully called it) was conceived on the basis of faulty intelligence and wishful thinking. Even as Churchill reiterated London's support for the Catroux plan, the report on which it was based was shown to be worthless. A chastened Catroux heard the grim facts from Colonel Collet, commander of Vichy's Circassian cavalry, who had slipped across the frontier to arrange the defection of his force. From this source Catroux learned

(a) that there has been no withdrawal from Syria to Lebanon (b) that on contrary Vichy troops are preparing to resist attack... (c) that troops and cadres will obey orders to resist.

In the light of these unpalatable facts, Spears advised London that "the possibility and extent of opposition to an entering force would be greater than the reports so far... indicated". This understatement camouflaged the fact that "the Catroux plan", which had been thrust upon Wavell, was demonstrably useless.⁵¹ Catroux himself was forced to advise de Gaulle that British forces would now be indispensable if Syria was to be taken at all.⁵²

These dismal tidings were no surprise to Wavell, who had never trusted Free French information and had little faith in Catroux's troops. A true Stoic, Wavell sensed that although the Collet report logically undermined London's decision on Syria, it was futile to re-open the whole question. Reconciling himself to the ancient and local tradition of making bricks without straw, Wavell began to form a British invasion force. Replying to Churchill on 22 May, he attributed his original reluctance to the unreliable nature of Free French information and stressed that a tougher task lay ahead than Catroux had imagined. Nevertheless he was now "prepared for action against Syria". In this new resolution Wavell suddenly emerged as an exponent of the RAF position that, above all, the Levant was a potential enemy aerodrome:

The whole position in Middle East is at present governed mainly by air-power and air bases. Enemy air bases in... Cyrenaica, Crete, Cyprus and Syria would make our hold on Egypt difficult.

One of his army's prime objects was, therefore, "to keep [the enemy] from establishing himself in Syria".⁵³ On 27 May Wavell presented London with an outline of Operation Exporter, his plan for the occupation of Syria.

In terms of military significance, the Levant had entered the "urgent" category since the outbreak of hostilities in Iraq. As London began to consider specific military measures in Syria, the political ramifications thrust themselves afresh upon the attentions of the War Cabinet, and they were forced at last to grasp the nettle of Arab politics. On 19 May Churchill set the pace with a note entitled "Syrian Policy", the vigour of which was matched only by its simplistic crudity. "If we can hold our own in the Western Desert and in Crete", Churchill began, "the invasion of Syria must take first place in our thoughts. For this, we must have an Arab policy".

This bald statement was the prelude to some remarkably dubious assertions and suggestions:

The French have forfeited all rights in Syria since they quitted the League of Nations....* Furthermore, none of our promises to de Gaulle cover mandated territories. Therefore... we should give them [only] one more chance....

If the French Army in Syria will come over to us and work with the Free French forces till the end of the war, we should refrain from raising the question...of the Mandate.... If, however, [Dentz is defiant] we must get the Syrian Arabs on our side. For this purpose we should proclaim that the French Mandate has lapsed [and establish] an independent Sovereign Arab State in Syria in permanent alliance with Turkey...and Great Britain.

In the latter case, Vichy troops were to be repatriated or interned while the Free French would simply be locked out of the Levant

* This was erroneous. See Appendix B.

altogether! Churchill was actually proposing that any future French presence in the Levant be entirely dependent on the incumbents' readiness to rally to Free France or at least to become British auxiliaries. This, by all the current indications, was tantamount to abolishing the French mandate at the stroke of a British pen - and in that case, the "position would have to be put squarely to de Gaulle, but his reactions should not affect our course". This breezy assertion certainly under-estimated de Gaulle's determination to hold the Levant for France, and the lengths to which he would go.

Churchill's parochial contempt for Arab affairs was transparent in his next remarks:

I am not sufficiently acquainted with Syrian affairs... to formulate a plan for the creation of the Syrian State, but I cannot doubt that our Islamic experts can easily do so.

The effect of our Proclamation, if followed by a wise decision as to Arab personalities, might well gratify the Arab race and rally them to a strong Nationalist movement to expel all European masters, or would-be masters, from their country.

Churchill, who clearly meant that such a development would be a Good Thing, had evidently forgotten that in the Arab world the most visible "European master" was Great Britain! To be capable of this oversight at the height of the Rashid Ali revolt was simply breath-taking.⁵⁴

It certainly dumbfounded the polished diplomats at the Foreign Office, whose initial reaction to Churchill's bruising irruption was one of dismay and exasperation. This gave way to feverish activity as the Foreign Office prepared a most significant set of proposals which Eden presented to the War Cabinet on 27 May. While this reply eliminated the worst Churchillian fallacies, a distinctly tough residue survived, resulting in a harder line than the Foreign Office itself would have initiated.

"The Prime Minister has asked that our Arab policy should now be reconsidered", Eden began, tactfully deflecting the implication that no clear policy existed. "We [must make] decisions of the utmost importance relating to the future of Syria. Our decisions must fall within the framework of the wider policy which we wish to adopt towards the whole Arab world". Proceeding to specific cases, Eden circled warily around the Palestine question and arrived

at the crucial Syrian decision:

I recommend that the Free French should be given a chance to win over Syria to our side. Should it once become clear either that the Free French are unwilling to make a declaration promising Syria and Lebanon their independence, or that a declaration, when made, is not going to bring Syria over to us, we should hold ourselves free to turn from the Free French towards the Syrian Arabs. We should then ourselves make a declaration promising Syrian independence. This might well be timed to harmonise with a British advance into Syria.

"There should not be insuperable difficulties about setting up an independent Arab Government in Syria", Eden continued, noting that its "independence" would have to be propped up by Britain and Turkey. After dealing with other Arab countries, Eden summarised his recommendations, which included:

(b) Syria. If the Free French can do nothing, we should declare ourselves in favour of Syrian independence..... (e) Public support of the idea of Arab federation, the terms of which it must be left to the Arabs to work out.* 55

With the presentation and acceptance of this paper, a crucial idea had evolved in British policy towards the Levant. Hitherto any political declaration was to be made by the Gaullists "in favour of Syria independence after the war". Now London had resolved that independence should be immediate and that, if the Free French appeared ineffective, Britain should make her own declaration as she advanced into the Levant States.

This was a much less accommodating attitude towards the Free French. A month earlier, the Head of French Department in the Foreign Office had minuted that "the authorities in Cairo are

* Two days later Eden gave effect to "(e)" in his Mansion House speech, declaring that "many Arab thinkers desire for the Arab peoples a greater degree of unity than they now enjoy. In reaching out towards this unity they hope for our support. No such appeal from our friends should go unanswered....the cultural and economic ties between the Arab countries and the political ties too should be strengthened. His Majesty's Government...will give their full support to any scheme that commands general approval". (Copy in SPRS II/5, last sentence marked by Spears).

agreed that our ultimate aim should be to get Syria for Free French. This is, in my view, the best solution. The French have always been suspicious about our designs in Syria and our attitude towards the Pan-Arab movement".⁵⁶ This view, endorsed in ascending order by the Foreign Office mandarins, had received Eden's blessing at the time. It had now been watered down as events compelled the Foreign Office to give priority to Arab aspirations, in spite of French suspicions. The Rashid Ali revolt and the German advances had narrowed down the British options.

In Cairo, as in London, the military decision to enter Syria and Lebanon raised unavoidable questions about the future political status of the Levant. Given the unsettling effects on the Arab world of the Rashid Ali revolt, and the largely British composition of the invasion force,* what were to be the political tactics and objectives of Operation Exporter? In broad terms, there was already an Anglo-Free French agreement to implement Catroux's independence tactic when the opportunity presented itself. This determined the general direction of political tactics, but the original concept was embellished to accommodate the mood of Arab politics and the major role which had now been assigned to British troops.

On the Free French side, Catroux outdid himself with a proclamation of immediate independence for the Levant States, to be secured in a formal treaty between Free France and the Levant States. In drafting this proclamation he was edited from afar by the Foreign Office and from rather too near by Spears, whose schoolmasterly vigilance he was wont to avoid by pleading a pressing dinner engagement. Spears even claims authorship of the actual proclamation delivered on 8 June 1941, which was produced

* The Exporter force initially consisted of the 7th Australian Division, the 5th Indian Brigade, and an assortment of Scots Greys, Cheshire Yeomanry, and other British units accompanied by the Legionnaires, Marines and Senegalese under Free French command. Towards the end of June more Anglo-Indian forces were thrown in, together with the Arab Legion.

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on 20 May by Catroux and eventually approved by the Foreign Office.⁵⁷ This included the statement

I have come to terminate the mandatory regime and proclaim you free and independent. You are therefore henceforth sovereign and independent peoples.... Your independent and sovereign status will be guaranteed by a treaty which will also define our reciprocal relations... 58

When de Gaulle returned to Cairo at the end of May he accepted this proclamation as Catroux's own work, unaware of the British tutelage behind it, which he would have considered intolerable.

Meanwhile on the British side there emerged a proposal to endorse Catroux's proclamation of independence in an official statement, which would also disavow any British ambitions in the Levant other than the war effort itself. Thus on 19 May, when Wavell urgently requested a directive from the Chiefs of Staff, he also asked that any military intervention in Syria should be heralded by a Free French proclamation of independence, endorsed by Britain.⁵⁹

This was no startling innovation. It was a particular adaptation of a principle and practice which was well established between Catroux, Wavell and Lampson, and was based on the Crosthwaite telegram of January 1941. In this document, it will be recalled, the Foreign Office had clearly initiated British identification with any Free French declaration of Syrian independence. It had even suggested the possibility of a British assurance that Catroux's independence pledge would be honoured. Moreover Catroux had clearly accepted British association with his overtures, and in consultation with Wavell and Lampson he had endorsed British contacting and bribery of Syrian Arab Leaders.⁶⁰ Catroux had therefore accepted a significant British involvement in the internal affairs of Syria already. It was this somewhat ill-defined situation which had spawned the Glubb-Kirkbride mission. Principle and practice were firmly established, and no great leap

was required to propose British association with Catroux's impending proclamation.

Nor was there anything sinister in such a proposal emanating from Wavell's headquarters, for the idea was by no means confined to British military circles. It was well-aired among all the relevant authorities in Cairo, and for once Wavell, Lampson and Spears seemed to be in full agreement.* Britain was currently suppressing an Arab revolt, she was the main imperial power in the Arab world, and she was to be the main invading force in a restive and well-armed territory. Her intentions had to be clear and welcome, and in the circumstances she could hardly be expected to entrust her threadbare integrity to a group of Frenchmen whose authority and motivation was debatable. From their Baghdad and Cairo reports, the British knew

how seriously Nationalist opinion in these countries regarded the future of Syria in particular and how much the failure of the French to...implement [the 1936] treaties was condemned. Hitherto this had merely served to make the French unpopular; but once Great Britain was in...these countries, odium would fall on her if she failed to make the Free French behave more correctly towards them. 61

Nevertheless the British guarantee was not designed purely to prevent any Free French prevarications. Free France was not a recognised government, and at this stage its authority to act in the name of France was simply a Gaullist doctrine. In announcing her own endorsement to Catroux's proclamation, Britain was perhaps endorsing the moral authority of Free France. But above all she was making her intentions quite unequivocal, ruling out the possibility that, in some future betrayal of Syrian aspirations, she could simply argue that the Free French promise lacked the weight of any constituted government. Although the guarantee was partially designed to keep the Free French on the straight-and-narrow, the British clearly did not anticipate any monumental backsliding. A covering statement of British intentions was entirely reasonable in the current Middle Eastern circumstances.

* See Appendix C.

None of this cut any ice with de Gaulle when he arrived back in Cairo, and the ensuing row over the British guarantee occurred not because the British were suddenly seeking some unprecedented involvement in Syrian affairs, but because this principle was new to de Gaulle personally. He had not been fully informed about Catroux's co-operation with Wavell and Lampson and had not personally accepted any British role in Syrian internal affairs.* As a result, he viewed the British proposal as a sudden and sinister intrusion upon a purely Free French reserve, and reacted strongly. "Hardly had the decision to go into Syria been taken when already the British let their intentions be seen", wrote de Gaulle:

Sir Miles Lampson requested that the proclamation should be made both in the name of [Britain and of] Free France. I opposed this, naturally. [He] then insisted that the text should mention the British guarantee given to our promise. I rejected this request, on the ground that the word of France had no need of a foreign guarantee.... It was easy to see that our partners wanted to create the impression that, if the Syrians and Lebanese received independence, they would owe it to England...

Spears made a brave attempt to persuade de Gaulle that Britain's proposal would actually enhance the prestige of Free France, but if de Gaulle was impressed (as Spears implies) he quickly reverted to his instinctive suspicions of British perfidy.⁶²

* The liaison between Catroux and de Gaulle left a lot to be desired, and this was one of many cases where the British, thinking that they had an understanding with "Free France", had only a personal understanding with Catroux, who was frequently disavowed by de Gaulle. The Crosthwaite telegram had never been sent to de Gaulle, because, as Crosthwaite minuted, "General Catroux will presumably not be able to go very far without consulting General de Gaulle, but as his own views seem so reasonable... I think we might leave it to General Catroux to raise that particular difficulty". [6/12/1940 minute, F0371/24592/E3103]. Unfortunately this assumed far too much about the degree of consultation between the two men.

De Gaulle's veto forced the British to prepare a separate public statement endorsing Catroux's proclamation and affirming their political disinterest in Syria.* While de Gaulle could not prevent its release, he wrote to Lampson on 3 June reiterating that political interference would not be tolerated. The British statement, he repeated, was unnecessary "in so far as it concerns [our] promise of independence". And if the contingencies of war led to trouble between the Free French and Syrians, then the British, bearing in mind "the recent events in Iraq", should not feel bound to participate in the "solution". Free France, de Gaulle concluded, took the view that "any political settlement in Syria" was entirely a matter for the French and Syrians to resolve.⁶³

As a piece of Machiavellian foresight and an exercise in euphemism, this letter makes interesting reading in the light of the harsh methods used by the French to impose their "solution" in the Levant after 1919 - methods which the Gaullists attempted to repeat after Operation Exporter. But if de Gaulle ever hoped that this letter would give him a free hand in Syria, he was soon disillusioned. It was not good enough to assert that the word of France needed no guarantee. This might have been a Gaullist article of faith, but it was also a highly unrealistic view of France's image in the Levant. Since 1919, the Syrians had had every reason to distrust the French. In any case, de Gaulle was begging the question by referring to "the word of France" for he lacked any authority (or desire) to sign away a square metre of French territory. The British, as Spears rightly observed, "had to bear in mind that de Gaulle's constant assertion that "Free France" was identical with France took in no one apart from the Free French and de Gaulle in particular".⁶⁴

Hardly had the British and Free French agreed to differ over the proclamation of independence when a fresh dispute broke out over Catroux's prospective title. De Gaulle was proposing to appoint him

* Catroux's proclamation did not - as Mickelsen asserts - contain a reference to the British guarantee. See Appendix D.

High Commissioner in which case he would seem to formally succeed Dentz as the mandatory ruler of the Levant States. Behind this titular dispute there lurked the fundamental conflict between Britain and Free France about the respective political and administrative roles they were about to assume in the Levant. On 4 June Spears warned Churchill that trouble loomed large:

General de Gaulle has evidently realised we might use our guarantee to make him go further than he intended in the path of granting freedom to the Syrian populations....

... no interference of any kind will be brooked [by de Gaulle]...

... If we are compelled to stand by unable to act or even advise whilst negotiations...of the most difficult kind are taking place between the new French rulers in Syria and the natives our prestige will be further undermined.

...I submit that we cannot disinterest ourselves of this question even on military grounds. If trouble breaks out between Free France and Syria it may be very embarrassing to us [and could spread through the Arab world].

De Gaulle's letter to Lampson had certainly put the cat among the pigeons, and Spears was sure that the Frenchman was not bluffing. "De Gaulle's intransigent attitude is well illustrated by [his remark] 'You are going into Syria because I consent'... it reflects his attitude of mind". Spears accordingly asked Churchill to intervene by requesting a more collaborative approach from de Gaulle:

...There are no advantages in leaving the matter over for later discussion. If and when de Gaulle disposes of large bodies of troops in Syria he will be even more intransigent....

[In Syria] we are dealing with two worlds, the French and the Arab. The former once rallied is of little interest to us....

...Finally de Gaulle insists on alluding to Catroux as "Haut Commissaire". [This term] is obnoxious to all Syria. A word on this subject to de Gaulle would be very helpful. 65

On 5 June Wavell endorsed these sentiments. "De Gaulle is not being easy", he told Churchill, "please see Spears' [above telegram] on

which I hope you will act especially as regards term High Commissioner for Catroux, which would go far towards destroying effect of proclamation".⁶⁶ In another signal on the same day, Wavell repeated his anxiety:

Have just received telegram from Wilson* to effect that use of term High Commissioner by Catroux will cause grave trouble and will create doubt as to our intention towards inhabitants. Efforts by Spears to move de Gaulle at this end have failed. 67

Later that day, Churchill responded to these appeals with a brief, urgent message to de Gaulle: "I must ask you in this grave hour not to insist on declaring Catroux High Commissioner of Syria".⁶⁸

Outgunned, de Gaulle replied through Spears on the following day, announcing that Catroux's designation would be Delegate-General and Plenipotentiary. At the same time he stressed that Catroux's proclamation provided for a treaty "which will establish (Consacrer) the right and special interests of France....

Any policy which appeared to sacrifice these rights... would be bad and dangerous from point of view of French opinion.... In this grave hour for us as well as for you, I call your very special attention to this point which does not always appear to me to be well understood locally.... The harder you strike at Vichy, the more necessary it is to safeguard the interests and feelings of France. 69

This was the signal for Churchill to reply more fully along the lines suggested by Spears on 4 June. In doing so he took into account a further message of 5 June from Spears, reporting a more satisfactory conversation with de Gaulle. The unlucky Spears had been obliged to explain to de Gaulle, who was "upset", why British troops were to precede Free French troops in the first advance into Syria. Narrowly avoiding yet another dispute, Spears somehow persuaded an "unusually receptive" de Gaulle that this was a purely military measure designed, in view of the enemy's reported attitude, to avoid a fratricidal bloodbath. De Gaulle was evidently so distracted by this prospect that he absently promised to make no trouble over

* General Sir Henry Maitland ("Jumbo") Wilson, the British Commander in Palestine and Transjordan, was commanding Operation Exporter.

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future negotiations with the Syrians. He confided to Spears his personal agony over his enemy-compatriots in Dentz's army. "I am sure that this is true", concluded Spears. "A word of affection and comprehension from you would tend to smooth over the many difficulties that, whatever happens, are bound to arise".⁷⁰

Churchill's telegram to de Gaulle, on the eve of Operation Exporter, was both diplomatic and definitive of the British outlook:

...my best wishes for success of our joint enterprise in the Levant.... You will, I am sure, agree that this action, and indeed our whole future policy in the Middle East, must be conceived in terms of mutual trust and collaboration. Our policies towards the Arabs must run on parallel lines. You know that we have sought no special advantages in the French Empire and have no intention of exploiting the tragic position of France for our own gain.

I welcome therefore your decision to promise independence to Syria and the Lebanon, and as you know I think it essential that we should lend to this promise the full weight of our guarantee. I agree that we must not in any settlement of the Syrian question endanger the stability of the Middle East. But subject to this we must both do everything possible to meet Arab aspirations and susceptibilities....

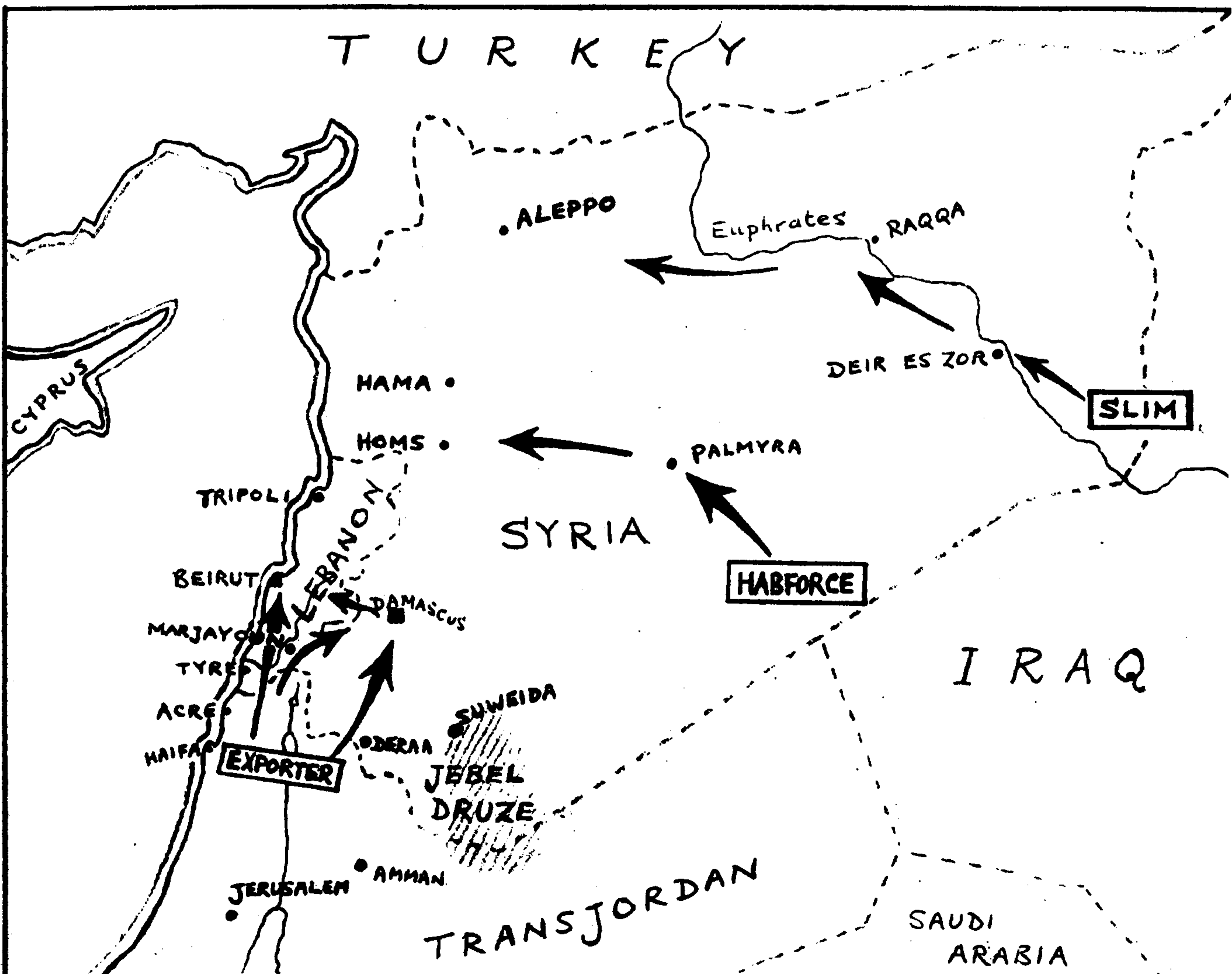
... At this hour, when Vichy touches fresh depths of ignominy, the loyalty and courage of the Free French save the glory of France. 71

The stage was now set for Operation Exporter. Despite some last-minute anxieties in London, and a message from Dentz to say that the Germans had cleared out of Syria, the invasion went ahead.⁷² In the dawn of 8 June 1941, Australian troops advanced in two columns into the Lebanon, while the Indian and Free French troops moved into Syria. Catroux, his hour come round at last, added his stirring rhetoric to the cacophony of battle:

Honour does not permit the Levant to be delivered to the enemy without a fight.... French soldiers of the Levant: are there those who would block my route when I march against the enemy? Are there those who would [turn] against me the weapons which, these recent days, have not been used against German planes? 73

There were. The Army of the Levant put up a ferocious resistance, and fighting between Gaullist and Pétainist was particularly brutal and bitter. Atrocities against prisoners were frequent.

Despite this stiff resistance, the Allies made modest progress at first. By 12 June the Free French were within ten miles of Damascus, while the Australian columns had taken Marjayoun in the centre and crossed the Litani river beyond Tyre on the coastal route. At this point there was a strong Vichy counter-attack, Marjayoun was re-captured, and the Allied advance did not resume for a week. Nevertheless Dentz's efforts faded as Vichy reinforcements failed to materialise, while a new British threat appeared in the east. Habforce, having crushed the Iraqi revolt, moved through the Syrian desert, while Slim's 10th Indian Division advanced along the Euphrates. Dentz began to falter, and his main motivation - the need to play to the German gallery for the sake of metropolitan France - began to wear thin as proposals for Luftwaffe intervention broke down. Meanwhile the Royal Navy, undeterred by Axis aircraft, continued its



heavy bombardment of Vichy's coastal positions. On 21 June the Australians entered Damascus. Dentz still held strong positions, but by early July he had lost 6,000 men and most of his aircraft. On 12 July his envoys approached the British for an armistice.

"Thus ended the most unpleasant campaign for all concerned", wrote Wilson, "as our troops were fighting an army which might have been on our side". To the bitterness of civil war were added the complications and suspicions engendered by the presence of the British in this jealously-maintained French territory.⁷⁴ This situation was aggravated by the opportunism of the local peoples. Slim's experience in Deir es Zor was typical:

I was greeted by a distinguished-looking Syrian in European dress [who] welcomed us, the British, as deliverers, and trusted the French would never return. I made no comment on this nor did I confide in him that I thought General de Gaulle might have different views. 75

An armistice was signed at Acre on 14 July, the substance of which was as unhappy for the Free French as the date itself. Even the gods seemed to think so. They allowed an inebriated Australian journalist to fuse all the lights within a three-mile radius, obliging the brass hats to conclude their proceedings around the headlights of a motor cycle. The day's indignities were completed by another Australian who souvenired Catroux's magnificent gold-leafed kepi.⁷⁶

If the circumstances of the armistice were absurd, the terms were disastrous. The document did not even refer to the Free French, nor was Catroux allowed to sign it. Vichy's local auxiliaries, the *Troupes Spéciales*, were placed under British command. Dentz's surviving equipment was also acquired by the British. In their determination to have no dealing with Gaullists, the Pétainists preferred to hand over everything to the very power whose designs on the Levant France had always suspected. There was no mention of the mandate or of the independence of the Levant States. Vichy troops

theoretically could choose to change sides rather than be repatriated to France, but in reality there was little choice: a secret protocol between Wilson and de Verdilhac* denied the Free French a fair opportunity to win over their recent antagonists.

It was an almost unbelievable conclusion to what Churchill called a "joint enterprise". Practically every Free French objective had been lost in these unilateral terms, and Wilson seemed to be at pains to exclude them. The Acre convention "amounted to a pure and simple transference of Syria and Lebanon to the British"⁷⁷ and effectively buried the hopes which de Gaulle had expressed to Churchill on the eve of the armistice:

[As] our joint operation in Syria draws to happy conclusion I...express to you my conviction that we shall shortly find a solution, as regards the organisation of Franco-British relations in the East, which will be satisfactory alike [for] the rights and interests of France in Syria and [for] original inter-Allied military command in that theatre of operations. 78

Any such hopes in the mind of de Gaulle were dashed by the 14 July armistice, to be supplanted once and for all by his chronic suspicions of British perfidy. In retrospect, he concluded that even while the British and Free French were preparing to launch Operation Exporter,

their political rivalry was taking shape behind the facade. In [Cairo, Jerusalem and London], we could perceive the quivering activity of a specialised personnel which saw...the prospect of realising plans of action long since prepared. Events...put Great Britain in possession of such a hand of trumps, political, military and economic that she [could] not refrain from playing them on her own account. 79

To a man like de Gaulle, the terms of the armistice made this conspiracy theory almost irresistible. It will be seen, however, that the Acre agreement was not the result of some vast, premeditated, imperial plot on the part of the British. An unhappy coalition of circumstances and human limitations contributed more to the fiasco

* General de Verdilhac, field commander of Vichy forces in the Levant.

of 14 July than any malevolent intent.* Distant and inadequate communications, confusion, unavoidable haste and improvisation, poor politico-military liaison, personality clashes, prejudice, complacency and downright incompetence were the true villains. Yet while much of the damage was soon repaired, the Acre convention was a blow from which Anglo-Free French relations in the Levant never fully recovered.

* See Appendix D.

N O T E S

- 1 de Gaulle, i.176 - a warm and fitting tribute to Wavell.
- 2 Sachar, p.182f.; Warner, p.72f.; Spears, Fulfilment, p.27; de Gaulle (Documents), i.92.
- 3 Sachar, p.158f.; Warner, p.74f.
- 4 F.R.U.S., 1941, Vol. III, p.689f.; Sachar, p.181f.
- 5 de Gaulle, i.181; de Gaulle (Documents), i.139.
- 6 Lampson tel., 8 April 1941, PREM 3 422/14.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 PREM 3 422/1; SPRS II/5.
- 9 Spears, Fulfilment, p.30.
- 10 Ibid., pp.17, 26-28, 30-32.
- 11 Ibid., p.32f.
- 12 PREM 3 422/1.
- 13 Spears, Fulfilment, p.27f.
- 14 Ibid., p.34f.; Lampson tel., 18 April 1941, FO371/27321/E1571.
- 15 Spears tel., 16 April 1941, SPRS IA.
- 16 Spears, Fulfilment, p.36f.; Lampson tel., 18 April 1941, FO371/27321/E1571.
- 17 Spears, Fulfilment, p.37.
- 18 Ibid., pp.30, 62.
- 19 de Gaulle tel., 19 April 1941, de Gaulle (Documents), i.133.
- 20 Woodward, i.573.
- 21 Ibid., Field-Marshal Lord Wilson of Libya, Eight Years Overseas (1949), pp.104-108; Warner, pp.35-118; Sachar, pp.168-194; Churchill, iii.224-237.

- 22 Furlonge interview, 17 May 1978. The British Consulate was at that time operating from Aley, in the hills to the south-east of Beirut. Within a week, Consul-General Havard had been told to leave. Furlonge stayed on to close the Consulate, then made his way south to Haifa. Attached to the 7th Australian Division as its Political Officer, Furlonge was back in Beirut by mid-July, and resumed the running of the Consulate.
- 23 de Gaulle (Documents), i.139.
- 24 Spears, Fulfilment, p.86f.
- 25 de Gaulle tel. (Brazzaville), 10 May 1941, de Gaulle (Documents), i.141.
- 26 Warner, p.125.
- 27 Sachar, p.185.
- 28 de Gaulle (Documents), i.139f.
- 29 Warner, p.126.
- 30 Sachar, pp.184-189, Warner, p.127.
- 31 Spears, Fulfilment, p.62.
- 32 Ibid., p.64.
- 33 Spears tel., 6 May 1941, PREM 3 422/6 (and FO371/27322/E2018). This telegram (Lampson 1259: ELS 48) was sent from the Cairo Embassy, via the Foreign Office, to Churchill. Wavell and the War Office were simply by-passed. Spears later justified this procedure in his memoirs as a dire necessity (Fulfilment, p.94). See Appendix A.
- 34 Churchill, iii.228f.
- 35 Churchill minute, 8 May 1941, PREM 3 422/6.
- 36 Churchill tel., 9 May 1941, PREM 3 422/6.
- 37 de Gaulle (Documents), i.147f.
- 38 Ibid., p.150.
- 39 Field-Marshal Lord Wavell, Despatch on Operations in the Middle East from 7th February 1941 to 15th July 1941, Supplement to London Gazette, 3 July 1946.
- 40 Spears, Fulfilment, p.84. Spears' dates are a little mixed up in this passage.
- 41 Ibid., p.84f.; Catroux, p.125f.; Marshal of the RAF Lord Tedder, With Prejudice (1966), p.92.

- 42 Tedder, p.93.
- 43 Spears, Fulfilment, p.86.
- 44 John Connell, Wavell: Scholar and Soldier (1964), p.460f.
- 45 Wavell tel., 19 May 1941, SPRS IC/1.
- 46 Chiefs of Staff tel., 19 May 1941, PREM 3 422/6.
- 47 Connell, p.461.
- 48 Wavell tel., 21 May 1941, PREM 3 422/6 (my italics).
- 49 Sir John Dill minute, Ibid.
- 50 Churchill tel., 21 May 1941, PREM 3 422/6.
- 51 Spears tel., 21 May 1941, SPRS IC/1.
- 52 de Gaulle (Documents), i.155f.
- 53 Churchill, iii.291.
- 54 Churchill paper, 19 May 1941, PREM 3 422/1 (also PREM 4 32/5).
- 55 Eden paper (W.P. (41) 116), 27 May 1941, PREM 4 32/5.
- 56 W.H. Mack minute, 21 April 1941, F0371/27321/E1571.
- 57 Spears, Fulfilment, pp.87, 98. This claim must be rejected. It is clear from later disputes over the legal validity of the mandate that the Foreign Office and Catroux had agreed on subtle ambiguities in the proclamation in order to safeguard French mandatory authority in the Levant until some treaty of termination could be arrived at. See Chapter Five, page 33f. and its footnote 64. Spears would surely not have wanted to be associated with this kind of calculated ambiguity.
- 58 Text in F0371/27214/E2915; Catroux, p.137f.
- 59 Wavell tel., 19 May 1941, SPRS IC/1; Connell, p.461.
- 60 See Page 52 , Lampson tel., 8 April 1941 , PREM 422/14.
- 61 Unpublished Furlonge paper, c.1970 (held by Furlonge), p.4.
- 62 de Gaulle, i.188f.; Spears, Fulfilment, p.97.
- 63 de Gaulle (Documents), i.157f.
- 64 Spears, Fulfilment, p.97.

- 65 Spears tel., (ELS 129), 4 June 1941, SPRS IA.
- 66 Wavell tel., 5 June 1941, PREM 3 422/6.
- 67 Further Wavell tel., 5 June 1941, PREM 3 422/6.
- 68 War Office tel., 70501, 5 June 1941, PREM 3 422/6. In his memoirs, Churchill appends this sentence to his telegram of 6 June to de Gaulle, but this is incorrect.
- 69 Spears tel., (ELS 132), 6 June 1941, PREM 3 422/6.
- 70 Spears tel., (ELS 130), 5 June 1941, SPRS IA. This wire included the quip "the Cross our Commanders have to bear is the Cross of Lorraine". Who plagiarised who?
- 71 Churchill tel., 6 June 1941, PREM 3 422/6.
- 72 Sachar, p.201; Warner, pp. 138f., 141f.
- 73 Catroux, p.135f.
- 74 Wilson, pp.114-118.
- 75 Field-Marshal Sir William Slim, Unofficial History (1959), p.162.
- 76 Wilson, p.119; Spears, Fulfilment, p.123.
- 77 de Gaulle, i.194.
- 78 de Gaulle tel., 11 July 1941, PREM 3 422/6.
- 79 de Gaulle, i.187.

War is much too serious a thing to be left
to military men.

Clemenceau

Enter the Constable of France. Henry V, iii.7.

By the end of June Damascus had fallen, the Allies were struggling towards Beirut, and new British forces were advancing into Syria from the east. De Gaulle felt it was time to remind Churchill of the acute political dilemma created by Operation Exporter. "It is the first time that British forces united to those of Free France are penetrating into a [French] territory", he pointed out. Moreover, "tendencies of British policy in Syria have rarely coincided with [those] of French policy". France and the world would therefore be watching:

If, to the satisfaction of Vichy, Berlin and Rome, our common action in Syria and Lebanon seems to result in diminution of the position of France.... effect on the opinion of my country will be disastrous. I must add that my own effort, which consists in maintaining, morally and materially, French resistance at the side of England.... would be gravely compromised.

In the light of these dangers, de Gaulle stressed that "all local British authorities" in the Levant should tread most carefully, and not carry out a "displacement of authority to the detriment of France or a sort of control of the authority of France".¹

Alas, the most virtuous behaviour on the part of all British personnel in the Levant could not have got de Gaulle off the horns of his dilemma. The attitude of Vichy and the Axis, who were bound to indulge in some propaganda about British imperialism, was hardly an adequate criterion. Moreover, by its very nature, the "common action" in the Levant inevitably diminished the position of France. It was nonsense to deny this when the French Mandatory forces were being overthrown by their old regional rivals, the British, aided by renegade Frenchmen who had publicly declared their intention to terminate the

mandate. Now that the die was cast, de Gaulle seemed to be shrinking from the implication of his own commitments and having second thoughts - on the wrong side of the Rubicon. At the Foreign Office, Sir Horace Seymour commented that "a proper safeguarding of the French position" (vis a vis other European powers) would be one of Britain's aims in the Levant. "There must however necessarily be some 'diminution of the position of France' if independence is granted and de Gaulle must have known this when he proclaimed the promise of independence. He cannot have it both ways". Eden agreed.²

De Gaulle's reluctance to come to terms with his position boded ill for the immediate future. In his personal agony over fighting his old comrades and incurring the charge of betraying French interests in the Levant, de Gaulle was almost impossible to please. He developed a tendency to blame his difficulties too readily upon his British allies, and too little upon the painful logic of his position. This attitude demanded a remarkable sensitivity, breadth of vision, even infallibility, on the part of the British. Thus, when they erred de Gaulle read too much into their shortcomings. And when they erred abysmally, his reaction was even stronger.*

These tendencies emerged when a Syrian armistice was considered. De Gaulle himself raised this question in the first week of the campaign. He correctly anticipated that Dentz would request the repatriation of the Army of the Levant, and he was particularly concerned to prevent this. Explaining these things to London on 13 June, Spears added: "It is necessary to have Armistice terms ready - de Gaulle, Clayton and I are agreed on a text which will be submitted to General Wilson. If he agrees it will be forwarded".³

This was immediately followed by another Spears telegram to Churchill, containing a personal message from de Gaulle:

....If Dentz asks for an armistice, I think he will ask to re-embark his troops to send them back to France. In my view this should not be accepted at any price. All the troops must remain.... The only engagement we should accept would be [to] force no officer or man to serve in the Free French forces without his consent. Naturally all the material must be handed over intact. 4

* c.f. Appendix D.

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Having petitioned the Prime Minister yet again, Spears went on to arrange an agreement between Wilson and de Gaulle on the terms of the armistice. It embodied de Gaulle's wish to prevent any wholesale passage of Vichy troops back to metropolitan France, and gave the Free French maximum opportunity to swell their ranks by "rallying" their current adversaries. This tentative accord included the following undertaking on the part of General Wilson:

In view of the fact that the only interest of Great Britain in Syria is to drive out the enemies of both Great Britain and France, I have delegated to General Catroux, the Commander-in-Chief of the Free French forces in the East, the task of settling on the spot the destination of officers and men, of weapons and of the ancillary services as well as war materials of all kinds. 5

Unfortunately the Wilson-de Gaulle agreement sank without trace, for Spears had quite exceeded his authority, and had ignored a Churchillian edict that his communications on military affairs must be cleared through Wavell's headquarters.* And this time Churchill did not intervene on the side of his unorthodox appointee. The above signal was sent to Cairo and London in the hope that the Wilson-de Gaulle agreement would be used as a basis for the armistice. Instead of any thanks, however, Spears received a stinging reprimand from General Arthur Smith, Wavell's Chief of Staff, for his unauthorised interference in the business of Middle East Command, and his breach of the ruling on military communications. Spears, who saw himself as an honest broker rather than a meddler, replied that the

terms were first put forward by de Gaulle.... then shown to GOC [Wilson] who made some suggestions accepted by de Gaulle.

It was realised by all this was a question for Commander-in-Chief and GOC directed me to send suggested terms to Middle East. I repeated telegram to [War Office] ... do you not wish such telegrams to be repeated to London for information? 6

This explanation did not satisfy Wavell and Smith, who were as exasperated with Spears' armistice terms as they were with his piratical methods. They condemned the provisional Wilson-de Gaulle terms as an

* See Appendix A.

unacceptable basis for any armistice with Dentz. At Wavell's headquarters there was a firm conviction that the Army of the Levant must be repatriated, and this was given qualified support by the Foreign Office. It nevertheless came as a nasty shock to Spears and de Gaulle, and on 16 June Spears replied indignantly to Middle East Command:

General de Gaulle... holds very strongly that he should be consulted as to the terms [because] future dealings with the Vichy Army in Syria... will be governed by the Armistice terms. As these will bind him it is only right he should be consulted beforehand concerning their scope...

Never to de Gaulle's knowledge was repatriation promised to the Vichy troops either in propaganda leaflets or otherwise. If however any such promise had been made it could only have applied to those individuals who did not resist. 7

This signal was also repeated to the War Office and was soon seen by Churchill. But the Prime Minister himself had considered repatriation an acceptable option in his paper on Syrian policy, and he did not oppose it now. He confined himself to a brief minute to Eden on 18 June: "He [de Gaulle] should certainly be consulted beforehand". With this response, de Gaulle and Spears were effectively isolated - Churchill, the Foreign Office, the War Office and Wavell all agreed that at least some of the Vichy troops would have to be repatriated.⁸ *

While the British were under no specific obligation to repatriate any French soldiers, there were several reasons why this course of action was favoured. At Middle East Command there was a desire to secure the stability of the Levant as quickly as possible and reduce the demands on Wavell's thinly-stretched resources. Some of the forces tied down in Syria were badly needed in the Western Desert, where Wavell's latest offensive (Operation Battleaxe, 15-17 June) was ending in a precipitous retreat from Halfaya Pass, leaving Rommel a foothold in Egypt. In these menacing circumstances, Wavell told a Service Chiefs' meeting on 18 June that he regarded the French Army of the Levant as "an unmitigated nuisance" and that the best thing that could happen would be its removal from Syria "as quickly as possible".⁹ British readiness to repatriate Vichy troops would obviously render negotiations with Dentz less difficult and drawn-out, and help secure an armistice more rapidly.

* As Crosthwaite later reiterated, "we are not at war with Vichy, and if we were, the action which we should clearly have to take would be...to intern all but the most carefully selected volunteers for the duration". - minute of 26 July 1941, F0371/27302/E4140.

London also favoured repatriation. Its policy was shaped by the curious fact that Britain was not at war with Vichy France. However absurd this was to any soldier in Syria, it was no idle casuistry. There was a profound difference between a localised conflict in the Levant and outright war against Vichy France, with its strong position in North Africa and its great fleet anchored at Toulon. For Britain, still alone in her struggle with the Axis, it was no time to drive Vichy any further into the arms of Hitler.* Thus far, Exporter was an anomalous, localised conflict, and London was anxious to end it quickly and quietly. Sir Miles Lampson had even told war correspondents to drop military terminology and perform an exercise in euphemism avoiding any suggestion of a French defeat.¹⁰

Operation Exporter had already taken Britain to the brink of war with Vichy and London was anxious not to give the pro-Axis elements in France any more ammunition in their pursuit of full collaboration with the Germans. A magnanimous settlement in the Levant would ease the situation, and the generous treatment of captured Vichy troops was the obvious starting point. This was confirmed towards the end of June in secret talks with a Vichy emissary in London. This agent went on to tell Churchill's government on behalf of Pétain that French civil servants in the Levant would be instructed to co-operate with the Free French forces and that, in settling the Syrian conflict, Britain was expected to take this gesture into account. Churchill's reply was cordial. Stressing Britain's honest intentions, he pledged that "without prejudice to Arab independence" France would continue to be the privileged European power in the Levant, a fact which de Gaulle would simply "keep alive" during the war, and that Britain would not allow the French Empire to be whittled away when the war ended. "So try your best", he exhorted Pétain, "to feel your way through the detestable difficulties by which we are both at present afflicted".¹¹

* Although by mid-June, the British were convinced that Hitler meant to attack Russia and not simply blackmail her, there were no great hopes in London of gaining a powerful new ally, as it was generally thought that Russia could not withstand the Wehrmacht for much longer than Poland had done in 1939.

These wider concerns were fatal to de Gaulle's hopes of keeping the French troops in Syria and rallying most of them to the Free French cause. His argument was not without force, for he rightly claimed that repatriation meant having to fight some of the same battle-hardened troops again, in North Africa. Nevertheless de Gaulle had to swallow the proposal that French troops remaining loyal to Pétain would be repatriated. On 16 June he was still arguing through Spears that repatriation was neither necessary nor advisable. By the 19th, however, he had conceded to Wavell and Lampson that while "all those who are willing to serve with the Allies shall be able to remain freely.... All those who are unwilling shall be repatriated when circumstances permit".¹²

On 19 June de Gaulle had been "consulted" in Cairo, though this basic courtesy had been extended more by local good luck than London's good management. Certain peace feelers had been put out by Dentz through Engert at the American Embassy at Beirut, and on 19 June Lampson received a Foreign Office telegram giving details of this development. The signal was designated 'for the Commanders-in-Chief' but Lampson's assistant, Michael Wright, argued that a copy should go to de Gaulle. Wavell wanted to send a reply immediately, but finally agreed to de Gaulle's participation. Spears was therefore summoned to put the matter to de Gaulle, for Lampson was worried that the Frenchman might make trouble over the proposal contained in the telegram to repatriate Vichy troops. At 11 p.m. the various parties gathered under Lampson's roof and agreed on a set of armistice terms to be put to Dentz. Their text was then sent to the Foreign Office through Lampson. De Gaulle's acceptance of this text was amplified in a separate note handed to Lampson and Wavell during the meeting.¹³ He unequivocally accepted the principle of repatriation for those who were unwilling to join the Allies, provided that they were given a genuine choice. At the same time, Lampson's wire affirmed de Gaulle's right to have his own representative at the negotiations alongside the British.¹⁴

While this detailed Anglo-Free French text was being prepared in Cairo, another reply had already been prepared at the Foreign Office, where the need to consult de Gaulle had apparently been dismissed.

London was anxious to capitalise on Dentz's approach, and any reply had to follow a tortuous route from the Foreign Office to Washington's State Department (via the British Ambassador), on to Engert in Beirut and so eventually to Dentz. On the morning of 19 June the Defence Committee accepted the Chiefs-of-Staff opinion "that the situation in Syria should be cleared up as soon as possible". Eden (unaware that the Cairo terms were about to arrive on his desk) therefore read out a reply to Dentz prepared by the Chiefs of Staff and the Committee for Foreign (Allied) Resistance. These terms were accepted by the Defence Committee and London's reply was sent on its roundabout way to Beirut.* Churchill did not ask whether de Gaulle had been consulted.¹⁵

Apart from the stipulation that de Gaulle should be represented separately at the armistice convention, the London terms were almost identical with those prepared in Cairo. Yet the London telegram proved to be an unhappy piece of work. As far as Dentz was concerned it was doomed to oblivion, for the slow progress of the Allies now made a ceasefire appear premature. On 25 June Engert was therefore told that "the French authorities did not feel the time had come to negotiate".¹⁶ Even the Syrians had begun to say that Hitler would be in Moscow before the British were in Beirut.¹⁷† Dentz's envoy rejected London's terms with ill-concealed contempt.

If London's terms seemed presumptuous to Dentz, they looked sinister to de Gaulle, who thought he detected an attempt to exclude Free France from the negotiations. On 21 June he angrily told Eden that London's "unilateral and explicit reply" gave the distinct impression that "the British Government alone were qualified to answer". De Gaulle was the last man to accept such an implication:

I do not consider myself bound in any manner by... your telegram [and] I abide exclusively by terms of telegram whose text I accepted on evening of June 19th in agreement with the British Ambassador and British Commander-in-Chief. 18

* At the same meeting, the Committee heard the suggested Wilson-de Gaulle terms of 14 June, and endorsed the Chiefs-of-Staff's rejection of these terms on the grounds that an undertaking to repatriate loyal Vichy troops could not be evaded.

† The assault on Russia began on 22 June.

There was little excuse for London's failure to consult de Gaulle before sending terms to Beirut. Eden had been specifically asked to do so by Churchill.¹⁹ The similarity of London's terms, sent before the Cairo terms arrived in London, was a lucky accident. This did not prevent Eden from claiming that it was a determinant: "I regret... that General de Gaulle should feel aggrieved", the Foreign Secretary replied:

we took fully into account the views expressed to us by General de Gaulle and the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, respecting terms.... It therefore seemed unnecessary to refer text of our telegram to Wavell and de Gaulle, as terms were virtually identical and the matter brooked of no delay.

This statement was misleading. The only views London took into account on 19 June were the ill-fated Wilson-de Gaulle terms of 14 June - and by no stretch of the imagination could these be called "virtually identical". Moreover, Eden's reply continued to ignore the question of distinct Free French representation at armistice talks.

This omission angered de Gaulle at the time, since the question was deliberately dealt with in the Cairo text. It is therefore curious that de Gaulle does not air this valid grievance in his memoirs. Instead, he exaggerates other shortcomings of the London telegram, claiming that "Free France was not even mentioned in it". This is incorrect. The London text stipulated that Vichy troops be given "opportunity to join Free French". De Gaulle's own volume of documents bears this out!²⁰ Still, the general soundness of the London text did not distract de Gaulle from the glaring fact that it had been sent unilaterally, which made a mockery of the Cairo consultation. As Spears informed Churchill, "de Gaulle was cut to the quick.... that he was not consulted [by Eden] on the vital question of armistice terms. He ... wonders whether he can ever hope to collaborate successfully with Britain".²¹

* * *

Hopes of an early ceasefire had been dashed by Dentz, leaving the Foreign Office with nothing to show for its strivings except a serious clash with de Gaulle. In Syria and Lebanon the unlucky soldiery of two empires battled and blundered through another three weeks of

hostilities, while behind Allied lines the authorities were plunged into a period of administrative chaos. Somehow, London and Cairo had to organise satisfactorily the Anglo-Free French occupation and administration of the Levant at a time when communications between Cairo and Wilson's headquarters were quite inadequate, when de Gaulle was roving about between Cairo, Damascus and Brazzaville without advising Spears of his itinerary, Spears was wrangling with Wilson and Smith about liaison arrangements for the Levant, Wavell himself was being replaced by Auchinleck, and Rommel was at the gates of Egypt. At the same time Oliver Lyttelton was being installed at Cairo to represent the War Cabinet and weld the many military and civilian authorities into some semblance of unity.

In London, de Gaulle's wrath had evidently had a salutary effect upon the Foreign Office, which now attempted to consult Free France in the fullest possible sense. On receiving Vichy's counter-proposals for a British occupation of Syria while Vichy itself retained the Lebanon, Eden sought de Gaulle's assent before firmly rejecting the offer.²² This polite gesture went unrewarded since de Gaulle, minus Spears, was now pursuing his own affairs all over the Middle East. So was Spears, who managed to be in Jerusalem when de Gaulle was in Damascus, and in Damascus when de Gaulle returned to Cairo!²³ This odd form of liaison wrecked Eden's attempt to consult de Gaulle, and after a week's delay, London sent its own stiff reply to Vichy. "This", observed Crosthwaite at the Foreign Office, "is clear proof of the absurd position that we have been put in by General de Gaulle's desire to be consulted on all points when he is not only not in London... nor even in Cairo; but speeding to and fro in the Middle East".²⁴

At the same time, a tactful message (via Spears) inviting de Gaulle to return to London had also fallen by the wayside:

Recent telegrams...suggest dangerous misunderstandings may be arising on several points between General de Gaulle and His Majesty's Government. Any such misunderstandings are...unnecessary but are possibly due to extended absence of General from London where policy has to be decided in face of rapidly changing situation. Prime Minister therefore hopes de Gaulle can see his way to returning here soon for general exchange of views. Thereafter he could return immediately to

Middle East if he so desires. [De Gaulle] should also be assured that there is no intention of diminishing the support promised and given to him and to the Free French movement. 25

It was Spears' particular task to convey this kind of message to de Gaulle, and the wire was addressed to Spears in Cairo. Unfortunately he did not return from Damascus until 9 July. By that time de Gaulle had left for Brazzaville, and Spears had lost the opportunity to present London's invitation to the General.*

In his wake de Gaulle had left London and Cairo with plenty to fret and fume about. On 27 June Cairo learned of two decrees and a covering letter to Catroux, issued by de Gaulle in Damascus and destined for publication as far afield as London and Brazzaville. The decrees declared Catroux "Delegate-General and Plenipotentiary of...Levant States" and, more ambiguously, "Commander-in-Chief of Levant". The covering letter instructed Catroux, among other things, to assume "all powers exercised hitherto by French High Commissioner for Levant and all responsibilities incumbent upon him", and stated that "the mandate conferred on France ...must be carried out to its conclusion and the work of France must go on".²⁶

London did not receive all this text until 30 June, but the War Office thereafter lost no time in reacting. "Have these three documents been published and if so when and how?" it demanded of Wavell. "If not publication should certainly be deferred.... Were you consulted by de Gaulle or Spears..? Letter from de Gaulle to Catroux appears to give latter full powers now exercised by Dentz to exclusion of any British control". The Foreign Office also noted that Catroux had been baldly designated Commander-in-Chief of the Levant without reference to Wilson or the British army. "This is typical of... de Gaulle", observed Mack.[†] "We shall find him as jealous and suspicious in regard to Syria as any Vichy Frenchman - perhaps more so as he feels he has to destroy the idea that he is under British tutelage". This was no exaggeration.²⁷

* Spears seems to have been in Damascus on his own initiative, discussing liaison arrangements with Catroux and meeting Syrian notables. His memoirs suggest at one point that he was there on Lyttelton's authority, at another that he was there on London's authority. But Lyttelton did not set foot in the Middle East until 5 July, and London clearly expected Spears to be with de Gaulle in Cairo.

[†]Head of French Department at the Foreign Office.

The following day London heard from Wavell that "Neither de Gaulle nor Spears consulted me concerning text of two decrees and letter nor do we know if Spears himself was consulted. De Gaulle comes and goes between Syria and Cairo without any reference to me or as far as I know to General Wilson". Wavell himself considered the two decrees "unobjectionable" but deplored "the complete absence of any recognition of my authority or that of [Wilson]. This is quite in accord with de Gaulle's whole attitude", Wavell declared:

This is that Free French are inheritors of all rights and responsibilities of previous Vichy Government of Syria.... he remarked that General Wilson would have no role to play except as Commander of British Troops in a country they did not administer [and] on political and economic questions [he] would refuse to cede us anything. He declines to recognise that there is an Arab question at all or that French are unpopular in Syria. There are many indications that... Free French feel that implementation of promise of independence...can wait till end of war.

Wavell went on to report that, according to de Gaulle, France had regained "sovereign power" in the Levant through the medium of Free France and the British army was therefore a mere guest in an Allied territory. This had been expressed to Wilson in writing. Wavell therefore appealed for a clear statement of the British position in the face of these swollen claims, and concluded:

If we give full rein to French aspirations there is a real danger of a resurgence of Arab hostility to us throughout Middle East on grounds that promises to Arabs have again been broken. It [is] question of balancing the advantages of a friendly ...Arab world against those of a satisfied Free French party since it seems most unlikely that the ambitions of the two can be reconciled. 28

On receipt of Wavell's telegram, Churchill promptly dismissed any thoughts of tact and conciliation and reacted with typical vigour. "It was never our intention that the de Gaullists should virtually step into the places of the Dentz administration", he told Eden. "Their losses and contribution have been only a small fraction of ours. They should be given a certain prominence", he went on,

in order to show that French interests in Syria are safeguarded against any other European power, and that we have no desire to supplant France in

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her privileged and favoured position in Syria. However, all this is but one to four or five in our Syrian policy, which remains the independence of Syria and all its peoples. No French policy which conflicts with this major decision can be accepted. It is therefore for de Gaulle... to make the same kind of arrangements with Syria as we made in the case of Iraq, with the important difference that in the ultimate issue we have military force behind us and he has not, to any extent.²⁹

These blunt and revealing views were put to Eden in an "Action This Day" minute, along with the suggestion that this response, plus some account of the controversy, should be wired to Malta - to catch Oliver Lyttelton, the newly-appointed Minister of State, on his way to Cairo. The Foreign Secretary lost no time in providing Lyttelton with an outline of the situation, pointing out that

de Gaulle's attitude is wholly incompatible with arrangements made with him before action in Syria began.... Catroux was to accompany Allied forces, [to handle] negotiations to give effect to Free French proclamation... and that his advice would be sought in all dealings with the administration and Governments of Syria and the Lebanon; but that until treaty or treaties referred to in the proclamation were concluded and so long as British forces were in occupation of the country final decision would rest with Commander-in-Chief.

Eden threw in Churchill's vigorous note almost unaltered and wired the lot to Lyttelton, who was currently enduring the austere company of Sir William Dobbie, the Bible-wielding Governor of Malta. Lyttelton, who was soon to encounter de Gaulle at his formidable worst, had at least some warning of what lay ahead in Cairo.³⁰

* * *

After a hair-raising night flight from Malta, Lyttelton arrived safely in Cairo on 5 July, determined to straighten out the ramshackle edifice of British administration in the Middle East. His functions were to "represent the War Cabinet on the spot and... carry out its policy and use its authority for that purpose". Specifically, he was to find means of "relieving the Commanders-in-Chief as far as possible of those extraneous responsibilities with which they have hitherto been burdened" and of "giving Commanders-

in-Chief that political guidance which has not hitherto been available locally". He was also charged with "settling matters within the policy of His Majesty's Government but involving several local authorities". The prime example of this duty was cited as "Relations with the Free French". This was already proving to be a masterly understatement.³¹

It was a daunting task, but Lyttleton, an able and confident man, lost no time in exerting War Cabinet authority in Cairo, where all was change and transition. On the day of his arrival, he was obliged to tell de Gaulle that while "Britain had no designs on the rights and interests of France in the Levant", there must be no more tinkering with armistice terms - de Gaulle would have to abide by the terms he endorsed in Cairo on 19 June.³² The following day, after talks with both Lampson and Middle East Command, he replied to Eden's Malta telegram. "The Civil Administration of Syria cannot be carried out satisfactorily if at all without the active co-operation of the French Civil officials", he reported, opining that "we supported... Catroux's proclamation which provided for him to assume the powers, responsibilities and duties of France in the Levant and we must honour our word". Lyttleton added that British needs could be safeguarded by the continuation of British martial law, that Catroux's treaties with the Syrians and Lebanese would presumably modify the position of French officials vis-a-vis the local peoples, and that dealings with Catroux ought to be "liberal and not niggardly".³³

Churchill himself, disturbed by Lyttleton's vagueness over the Syrians and Lebanese, quickly replied. Whilst endorsing Lyttleton's views on administrative relations with the Free French in the Levant, the Prime Minister reiterated that "the main point" was

to gain the Arab world by establishment and proclamation at earliest of Syrian independence in whatever form is most acceptable. Your [reference to this] is far from adequate. Our policy is to give the Syrian Arabs independence...

... the Arabs bulk far more largely in our minds than the Free French, and there can be no question of any lengthy delay in negotiating treaties which satisfy them and convince them that they have not merely exchanged one set of Frenchmen for another.

Churchill's idea of any lengthy delay was clearly implied:

Catroux's proclamation says "as soon as possible". This should mean that within a few days of the Vichy French surrendering prompt and vigorous negotiations should begin, and be pressed earnestly and swiftly to a conclusion. ³⁴

This was an impossible timetable, even if the Free French, the Syrians and the Lebanese had achieved some meeting of minds, which was unlikely and in fact never happened. Still, the Minister of State was left in no doubt whatsoever about London's priorities and aims.

Before any questions of independence could be tackled, there was a Vichy French army to be dealt with, disarmed and repatriated. Anticipating a ceasefire in the Levant, London corrected the earlier affront to de Gaulle. On 9 July the Defence Committee decided that "the armistice terms, as drawn up by the Commanders-in-Chief in the Middle East and accepted by General de Gaulle, should now be adopted for communication to General Dentz".³⁵ The Foreign Office accordingly wired instructions that Dentz was to be handed the Cairo terms of 19 June "which are the only terms in which de Gaulle has concurred".³⁶

By this time Dentz had approached the British for a discussion of armistice terms, and London had made amends with de Gaulle by giving clear instructions about the 'correct' terms. No sooner was this matter settled than there appeared the first signs of another, and far more serious, clash with de Gaulle. On 9 July Washington reported Vichy's stipulation that "General Dentz should only have to negotiate with British Military representatives and not with any representatives of de Gaulle".³⁷ This flatly contradicted the Cairo terms which London had just endorsed. It will be recalled (see Chapter 2), however, that one of the worst features of the Acre armistice was the exclusion of the Free French from the signing of the armistice. How could this happen within a few days of such clear instructions from London? The new Commander-in-Chief, Auchinleck, was in full agreement that the Cairo terms should be

put to Dentz - which makes the subsequent Acre fiasco even more difficult to explain.³⁸ The following account documents a sorry tale of bungling and sheer negligence on the part of General Wilson, compounded by Catroux's inadequacy, poor communications with Lyttelton, and London's short-sighted expediency.

On 11 July Auchinleck reported that he had discussed the coming negotiations with Wilson on the basis of the Cairo terms of 19 July.³⁹ That evening Auchinleck further reported that he had now heard from Dentz: "He requests rendezvous for Plenipotentiary on the understanding that he is authorised to negotiate only with British representatives to exclusion of those of any allied force". Auchinleck added that he and the Minister of State were considering their reply.⁴⁰ Around midnight Lyttelton wired their response to both Dentz and the Foreign Office. De Gaulle himself could have asked no more:

Dentz's message raises the issue of participation of Free French in the negotiations. I entirely agree... that we must insist on this and after discussion with Commanders-in-Chief, the following reply has been sent.

"...the British Commanders-in-Chief can accept no reservations regarding plenipotentiaries [and] unless General Dentz's plenipotentiaries present themselves with a flag of truce...offensive action will be resumed..."

GOC [Wilson] has been instructed to arrange for representation of Free French. 41

Lyttelton and Auchinleck had stood their ground admirably, despite the pressure to end the Syrian campaign as soon as possible, and they had not failed to direct Wilson accordingly. On the morrow, however, Lyttelton was surprised to receive a terse wire from Churchill, disavowing the stance taken in Cairo:

Negotiations should not be allowed to break down merely on the point of form as to who Dentz will surrender to. We have adopted terms agreeable to the Free French, but their presence should not constitute a fatal obstacle to our getting them. Of course if you can get them in all the better. 42

This telegram alone could have been enough to cause all the subsequent trouble over the armistice, but Lyttelton had the courage to ignore it.

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"I am no Nelson, and see well with both eyes, but I decided to let my telegram ride.... I confess to having passed an uneasy night", he recalled. Churchill's wire was not only "unfair to the man on the spot", as Lyttelton later remarked, but also ill-considered and short-sighted.⁴³

The stage was set for a trial of will in Acre, for Vichy had declared the Allied terms unacceptable, since they implied "recognition by French Government of Free French movement", while Wilson had been told to insist on Free French participation.⁴⁴ The latter, however - a breezy apolitical pragmatist - avoided trouble by physically including Catroux in his delegation but officially excluding him when it came to initialling the agreement. This satisfied the Vichy delegates. Catroux, who lacked his leader's stormy intransigence, allowed himself to be politely brushed aside. His convenient co-operation enabled Wilson to give Lyttelton an acceptable account of the proceedings at Acre. As a result, the Minister of State passed on the following message from Wilson to the Foreign Office :

Discussions with Vichy French representatives were satisfactory. The crux of the situation is evacuation of Vichy troops in their own ships to France.... Terms are very favourable to the Allies... [!]
I repeat if Vichy French can get their passage back to France all will be all right. 45

Wilson's term "satisfactory" actually covered a multitude of sins but the unlucky Minister was in no position to see this. Wilson had simply, and ambiguously, indicated that Catroux was present at the discussions. The poor communications system left Lyttelton at the mercy of Wilson's discretion, which proved to be a most unhappy arrangement. As Lyttelton recalled:

The task of getting the Armistice terms into proper order... was made much more difficult and baffling because I had to stay in Cairo, to be in touch hour by hour with London, and my only quick means of communication with Wilson in...Acre was by the Army telephone via Jerusalem. It was difficult to hear or be heard on this line. 46

There was no reason whatsoever for Lyttelton to suspect, at that stage, that Wilson had disregarded the spirit of his instructions concerning the Free French representation at Acre. It was reasonable for Cairo to assume that Wilson had insisted on a proper Free French involvement in the talks, and had prevailed upon de Verdilhac to accept this. After all, Wilson had the upper hand, and he had Auchinleck's authority to resume hostilities if the Vichy delegates refused the British terms and conditions.

Thus Wilson was allowed to carry on, undetected and uncorrected, to conclude an armistice which was a serious affront to Free France. He seemed to think that by involving Catroux in these proceedings he had ruled out any Free French renunciation of the Acre terms, but in this breezy assumption Wilson completely under-estimated de Gaulle and utterly failed to grasp the issues at stake.* Cairo had its first indications of what was happening when Wilson sent on the text which had been initialled by himself and de Verdilhac on 13 July. Here were the crass clauses by which Vichy auxiliaries, guns, supplies, indeed the Levant itself, were simply handed over to the British. Wilson had even styled himself GOC of British rather than Allied forces - for which he was quickly corrected by Auchinleck.⁴⁷

Wilson had presented Cairo with a fait accompli and, by involving Catroux, he had done enough to prevent Auchinleck and Lyttelton from taking the drastic step of disavowing his activities. Auchinleck, a newcomer to the Middle East and to Anglo-Free French relations, could hardly be blamed for thinking that Catroux's acquiescence meant that Free France was satisfied. As for Lyttelton, his hands were now tied by the knowledge that Churchill himself had endorsed Wilson's actions in principle, and would undoubtedly do so in practice if the work of his favourite General was repudiated. Churchill himself must therefore

* Why was Wilson so concerned to satisfy de Verdilhac? He was anxious to end Syrian operations without any further delay, for the slow progress of EXPORTER had inconvenienced Auchinleck and raised questions about his own captaincy. It is also likely that, after the abortive Wilson-de Gaulle agreement, Wilson had swung too far the other way in order to avoid a similar "mistake". If so, he lost the opportunity to explain this by breezing over the whole question in his memoirs. Moreover, like Wavell, he was fed up with the whole French problem. With the conservative instinct of most British generals, Wilson was uneasy about de Gaulle (technically a rebel) and more at home among the French military establishment, who "just did their duty" and conveniently left politics to the politicians.

take some responsibility for Cairo's acceptance of Wilson's armistice on 13 July, for he had roundly told Lyttelton to leave the Free French out of it, if necessary.

Cairo therefore contented itself with a few minor corrections to the 13 July text, unaware that the worst was yet to come. "General Wilson reports Verdilhac absolutely refused to use terms Vichy French and Free French", Auchinleck told London:

It was impossible to arrange for Catroux to initial agreement as this would have wrecked talks. Catroux most helpful during talks. Wilson hopes to get Catroux [to] sign final agreement but if this is impossible it is pointed out that Wilson's signature must be taken to cover the interest of all Allied Parties....

...General Wilson will take...as orders [that] if it is impossible to get Catroux's signature to the agreement he should be requested to hand a signed statement to General Wilson stating that he is in agreement with the terms and endorses them in the name of General de Gaulle..

The Minister of State who attaches particular importance to...the above has seen and concurred in...this telegram. 48

Wilson now had a free hand and he proceeded to spring upon his Cairo superiors the secret Protocol, attached to the final agreement of 14 July, which amounted to a fundamental betrayal of Free French interests.* On 14 July Wilson wired Auchinleck to report that the armistice had been

Signed...in spirit of cordiality. Separate confidential protocol prepared which does not form part of convention and which is not for publication in any form, regulating conditions under which Vichy troops may be approached to join Allied. Catroux has signed letter agreeing to terms of convention... 49

It was explained to London that "Only difficulty concerns Free French personal access to Vichy troops but leaflets and loudspeakers and individual choice agreed to. Catroux agrees".⁵⁰ This was quite misleading, for the Protocol was not seen by Catroux, who "had agreed to one thing and one thing only, not to send officers into the [Vichy] Camps".⁵¹ But the Protocol went far beyond this. It banned all personal contact between Gaullist and Pétainist, confined Free French spokesmen to the use of pamphlets, loudspeakers and wireless, and invoked the assistance of the British on the side of the Vichy

* The Protocol embodied the requests made by de Verdilhac. Its precise origin remains obscure.

authorities.⁵² This farcical arrangement in no way corresponded to the genuine individual choice stipulated in the original Cairo terms which Wilson had been ordered to implement. If Catroux was now to achieve Free French recruiting aims, he would have to be nothing less than a miraculous new Joshua, marching round the camps with a loudspeaker to bring down the walls of Pétainism.⁵³

The secret protocol had reduced the Acre agreement to the level of a cruel joke, and there was bound to be serious trouble with de Gaulle. "I am afraid our excellent friend, Jumbo Wilson, has rather blundered", observed Lampson in his diary.⁵⁴ "I was greatly incensed that no reference had been made to me about this secret clause" wrote Lyttelton.⁵⁵ Spears fumed in his diary that the armistice was "wet", the protocol "preposterous", and that the British had been fooled. On 17 July he conferred in Ain Sofar with Wilson and Catroux, this time on Lyttelton's authority, and observed that "General Wilson, animated by the best of intentions, completely failed to realise the importance of most of the decisions arrived at [in Acre]".⁵⁶ Spears thereupon impressed the disastrous implications of Wilson's dealings so forcefully upon the latter that the two men forthwith fell out.* "As can well be imagined", Spears recalled, "the atmosphere was somewhat strained. Jumbo, very much on the defensive, started off with a suspicion I did nothing to allay that the Armistice terms of which he had seemed... quite proud, did not appear in the same light to the Minister of State". Catroux, to Wilson's further discomfort, took the opportunity "to refute as far as possible all the points he had imprudently agreed to at Acre, which he now... realise[d] would infuriate de Gaulle".⁵⁷

* * * * *

What, if anything, was to be done about the Acre agreement, which was so utterly and unjustifiably bad for Free France? London offered no satisfactory answer to this question. At the Foreign Office

* Spears reminded that Wilson "could be very caustic" but Spears himself frequently employed a devastating sarcasm. In his memoirs he says that Wilson, in his ascent to the rank of Field-Marshal, was "levitated by hot air alone and propelled by a strong breeze from 10 Downing Street". Fulfilment, p.90.

Baxter wrung his hands ineffectually. The armistice, he noted, "scarcely recognises the existence of the Free French and gives them no rights whatever.... [their] full opportunity to recruit from the Vichy forces... has practically gone by the board". Having made these admissions, he bleated that it was "too late" for the Foreign Office to do anything about it.⁵⁸ A note from Eden to Churchill condemned the same shortcomings in the Acre text and admitted that "terms do differ in certain important respects from those which we [i.e., the War Cabinet Defence Committee!] had previously agreed", but again concluded "there is nothing we can do about it here". This note was not even sent, for Eden discussed the matter with Churchill verbally.⁵⁹

Their discussion took account of an ominous wire from de Gaulle to Catroux which gave notice of the impending hurricane from Brazzaville:

I hope that you have not been led into signing this armistice.... I do not approve of these terms as to which I have moreover never been consulted... I am obliged to take steps to place responsibility publicly on the shoulders of the British.... I will also study to what extent you have achieved points which were vital for us... 60

This message had the effect of silencing eloquent consciences in London, and a stiffish, unrepentant attitude emerged. On 17 July Eden sent a sort of "our-man-in-Acre-can-do-no-wrong" wire to Lyttelton which, by implication, suggested that no British errors were to be admitted to de Gaulle. Lyttelton was advised instead to tell de Gaulle "that he himself appointed Catroux as his plenipotentiary", and to "make what use you can of the extent to which Catroux had been associated in the negotiation and conclusion of the Convention and Protocols". Eden added that it might be "advisable to send for General Spears, who in previous crises has been able to exert a most useful influence upon de Gaulle".⁶¹

As for Churchill, he prepared a message for de Gaulle "to be used or not at [Lyttelton's] discretion [since] it may be right to let [de Gaulle] know where he gets off". Churchill confessed

himself "grieved" that de Gaulle did not find the Acre Convention agreeable, and went on to blame the hard fighting in Syria largely upon the Free French, adding that "the antipathy of the Syrian people to the French, whether Vichy or Free, is strongly marked". This would merely have set off a series of bitter charges and counter-charges, and Lyttelton wisely consigned Churchill's un-statesmanlike message to the oblivion of his files.⁶²

London had recognised that its undertakings to General de Gaulle had not been carried out, and yet there was no attempt to rectify this failure - only a bloody-minded defensive reaction to the first signs of Gaullist criticism. This is, perhaps, indicative of the plight of a junior ally in its dealings with a more significant power, although de Gaulle was to teach the British that virtual powerlessness itself could be turned into a weapon.* If anything more satisfactory was to be done, it was left to British representatives in Cairo. Fortunately, Lyttelton and Spears - both resourceful men - had by now become acquainted, and "got on like a house on fire". These two had already joined forces in an endeavour to repair at least some of the damage done at Acre. On 16 July, Spears' diary recorded his

Talk with Lyttelton, who is extremely worried about Armistice terms, and at prospect of facing de Gaulle on so bad a wicket - proposed myself that there was only one thing to do and that was to go and look into question myself... He jumped at it.

It was fortunate that Spears, with his unique understanding of Free France, was also a willing horse. He promptly flew off to Beirut to see Catroux and Wilson and, despite his cutting manner with Wilson, he was "able to find a solution acceptable to both Catroux and Wilson".⁶³

* Lyttelton recalled that "when French power was at a low ebb, decisions were... taken without consultation or agreement with [de Gaulle]. He never let this pass: he pointed with passion to anything ham-fisted or maladroit or impolite which we had done. By these means... he became respected and, since the English... hate scenes, and hate being exposed as clumsy, inconsiderate or disloyal, he built up a position which no amount of emollient diplomacy could have gained". - Chandos, p.249.

Spears' solution was to point out that the Protocol would have to be interpreted in the light of the Convention itself, which laid down the Allied right to attempt to rally the Vichy troops, and in Article 8 stipulated that "All means of communication" were to be assumed by the Allies. Thus the restrictions on personal contact contained in the Protocol flatly contradicted the Convention, and were therefore to be "interpreted" as an indication that Free French proselytising was to be done along orderly lines laid down by the British, who would chaperone Free French access to the Vichy troops! This splendid piece of casuistry was readily accepted by Lyttelton, who informed Churchill and the Foreign Office that Spears had produced a formula for getting round the Protocol, which in any case had not been seen by Catroux and "was included without any reference to me". Lyttelton thus hoped to "succeed in persuading General de Gaulle... that his essential requirements have been met. But he has been sending acidulated messages to Catroux... and I expect trouble with him".⁶⁴

Lyttelton's anxiety was obvious in a further wire to London on 20 July. "I expect to see General de Gaulle tomorrow", he reported:

I have had a message from him welcoming Spears' appointment [as head of liaison in the Levant] but expressing dissatisfaction with the Armistice terms.... If it were not for the Protocol I should feel on very solid ground with him... 65

* * *

That afternoon de Gaulle flew in from Brazzaville, and Lyttelton's worst fears were quickly confirmed. In a preliminary evening skirmish with Spears, who attempted to deflect the Frenchman's fury, de Gaulle threatened to withdraw Free French troops from British command, execrated Catroux as a spineless Anglophile, and virtually disintegrated over the Protocol. On this point Spears fully sympathised and was, of course, able to cite his formula for nullifying the Protocol: "At the end of what had in fact been a letting-off of steam by de Gaulle", Spears recalled, "I rather

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flattered myself that I had taken the edge off his spite, but in this I was wrong as I soon found out".⁶⁶

At 10 a.m. the following morning, in what was arguably his career-best performance, de Gaulle stalked into Lyttelton's office in a towering rage, denouncing the armistice and abominating all things British. "General de Gaulle was white with suppressed passion. He.... continued in a violent tirade until about half-past twelve", recalled Lyttelton, who found the playing-fields of Eton no real preparation for this sort of thing.⁶⁷ Even Spears, hardened by a year's liaison with de Gaulle, was startled by the man's demeanour: "He looked frightful... as if he had not slept for a week".⁶⁸ *

De Gaulle lost no time in exposing the gulf between the Acre Convention and the Cairo terms of 19 June, to which he had agreed. On this awkward wicket Lyttelton could only reply that Catroux had given his assent to the Acre text, and that the Protocol was admittedly "a mistake". This was about the only apology de Gaulle ever received, and he was not noticeably impressed, despite Lyttelton's assurance that Spears had "been able to nullify the effects of the Protocol". Brushing aside Lyttelton's courteous attempts to achieve a rational discussion, de Gaulle produced a document formally withdrawing all Free French troops in Syria from the command of the British. Lyttelton handed it back, declaring it to be "an ultimatum which could only be read as terminating the alliance". Amidst fresh volleys of Anglophobia the document lay in no-man's-land while Lyttelton refused it and de Gaulle refused to withdraw it. Eventually the British Minister brightly indicated that the time had come for luncheon and a siesta, and cordially invited de Gaulle to return at 6 p.m. to "make a serious attempt to agree". At a loss for once, the Frenchman grudgingly agreed.⁶⁹

There was no siesta for Lyttelton and Spears, who were understandably alarmed by the extremity of de Gaulle's reaction. Together

* There were only four men present: de Gaulle, Lyttelton, Spears and the Free French General de Larminat, an escapee from Syria in 1940, a staunch supporter of de Gaulle and altogether a tougher proposition than Catroux, whose position in the Levant he seemed to covet.

with Michael Wright and Henry Hopkinson (Lyttelton's diplomatic aide), they prepared to respond, if necessary, to de Gaulle's threats. Wright had even heard that de Gaulle intended to have Dentz arrested. Auchinleck was informed of the possibility of de Gaulle going to Syria to issue independent orders to his troops, which would quickly bring them into conflict with the British forces, while the presence of the Vichy troops would cause even greater chaos. It was agreed that de Gaulle must be prevented from going to Syria until some settlement was reached. Lyttelton, Spears and Hopkinson then called on Lampson "in a state of some agitation.... all out for de Gaulle's blood", and set up the machinery for cutting off the Free French leader. He was to be denied the use of wireless and telegraph and, if necessary, deposed in favour of Catroux - in which case de Gaulle would be "shut up" in a British prison!⁷⁰

These drastic measures never saw the light of day, for at 6 p.m. when de Gaulle returned he "had completely changed and although difficult was, comparatively speaking, amenable".⁷¹ There was a reasonable talk about the Operational relationship between Free French forces and the British command, and about the civil administration of the Levant. De Gaulle eventually appeared to agree with the current arrangement, after Lyttelton's insistence that an "attitude of suspicion was intolerable and that I was unwilling to listen to any statement... that the military authorities would use the security of their troops [to gain] political advantages for Great Britain". Finally the Minister reverted to the Armistice, pointing out that a Free French representative had been appointed to the Armistice Commission and that the Spears formula would render the Protocol harmless.

Lyttelton rounded off this extraordinary day by sending a clear account of both interviews to Churchill and the Foreign Office, omitting the afternoon's emergency conferences. "I have telegraphed at such length", he concluded,

because we are by no means out of the wood and there are... numerous points upon which bitter controversy may again break out.... After our first conversation yesterday both Spears and I felt that a complete breach was inevitable and that our minimum military requirements could not be safe-guarded as long as General de Gaulle remained leader of the Free French. Our fears may still prove well founded...

Lyttelton's final remark was understandable: "If this is a specimen of how diplomacy has to be conducted I feel glad that I did not embrace it as a career".⁷²

London also received a stiff telegram from de Gaulle, strongly objecting to the Acre Convention and indicating that definite counter-measures would be taken. "I hope that you personally", he told Churchill, "may feel that [this] considerably aggravates my difficulties and will have consequences which I deeply deplore".⁷³ If this hope was anything more than rhetoric, it was vain. Churchill was prepared to humour de Gaulle in a superficial way, but not to rethink his views on the Syrian question. "Your attitude towards de Gaulle is strongly approved", he replied to Lyttelton:

There is no real chance of his releasing us from our obligations to him as he would do in persisting in such an ultimatum as you properly rejected. Do not therefore allow him to upset or impede our policy in Syria. On this basis you should do your utmost to keep him in a good mood, making full allowance for the difficulties of his position. 74

Keeping de Gaulle happy while preventing any alteration or deflection of British policy in the Levant was a tall order, as Spears and Lyttelton were painfully discovering in Cairo. After de Gaulle and Lyttelton had agreed to thrash out agreements covering the interpretation of the armistice and the joint occupation of the Levant, their lieutenants, de Larminat and Spears, met on 23 July. Negotiations revolved around a paper prepared by de Larminat and endorsed by de Gaulle. Spears considered some of de Larminat's proposals worse than the de Gaulle document rejected by Lyttelton,

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and "a good deal of very straight talking" eventually led to a modification of the Free French position and an agreement on most points. Spears, de Larminat and their respective aides then brought their work back to Lyttelton and de Gaulle and a final agreement was reached, not without further haggling. Spears grumbled in his diary that de Gaulle had the best of these exchanges, that Lyttelton was more inclined to give way, and that Wright "would give everything away.... I was more aggressive, the only one to take on de Gaulle and I stirred him up".⁷⁵

The so-called Lyttelton-de Gaulle agreements were concluded on 25 July. They consisted of an "Interpretation" of the Acre armistice and two Enclosures on "Collaboration between British and Free French Authorities in the Middle East".⁷⁶ These were negotiated, drawn up and concluded entirely in Cairo and were not - as Lyttelton's memoirs suggest - cleared in advance by Eden and the War Cabinet. The Interpretation owed much to Spears' original proposal for negating the Wilson Protocol, and Lyttelton was hardly exaggerating when he informed Spears that the negotiations as a whole "could hardly have succeeded without you".⁷⁷ In reporting to Churchill the successful conclusion of the agreements, Lyttelton's pleasure was evident: "Considering this fish took out the entire line on Monday and looked likely to carry away the whole tackle, I feel some relief that after playing it up and down the pool for three days it is now on the bank".⁷⁸

Lyttelton's celebrations were obviously premature, for the fish himself was expressing considerable satisfaction with the proceedings. "After some hard toings and froings", de Gaulle told the Free French Delegation in London,

I concluded... an arrangement with Lyttelton....
We have thus the means of acting effectively
on the Vichy troops and of taking possession of
the [war] material.... Lyttelton is writing me
a letter recognising our entire sovereignty over
the Levant States. All this is a solid satisfaction.

De Gaulle was so flushed with success that he even made another attempt, by direct appeal to Churchill, to prevent the repatriation of Vichy troops altogether - despite his own agreement to this in June. This telegram evoked nothing but an exasperated snort in London, and there the matter ended.⁷⁹ De Gaulle's triumph was further reduced by a reply from the Free French Delegation, which criticised and disapproved of his methods:

it cannot have escaped our Allies that the immediate decisions which you [took], thus engaging officially the responsibility of the French Empire Defence Council, were taken and communicated [to the British] before seven of the nine members had been consulted.... We fear lest this may tend to diminish... the weight of your declarations.

... the British responsibility [for Acre terms was] not exclusive, on account of the presence of General Catroux. We cannot therefore totally and unilaterally repudiate the issue... of an enterprise carried on in common.

De Gaulle was frankly advised, in the event of further British "errors", to appeal to the British to make the realities conform to their declared policies. "Acts of rupture", however, were to be avoided.⁸⁰

The recipient of this sober advice was not noticeably persuaded to change his analysis of the British or his method of dealing with them. Having completed his arrangements with Lyttelton in Cairo, de Gaulle promptly set off for the Levant to satisfy himself that Free French rights and requirements were being met. At the end of July, the Levant was understandably a chaotic place, and in so far as events conformed to any guide-lines, they were still Wilson's rather than Lyttelton's. It was one thing to produce the Lyttelton- de Gaulle agreements in Cairo, and quite another, and harder, thing to implement these terms in all the prevailing confusion of an Allied occupation. It certainly could not be done overnight, but de Gaulle was evidently reluctant to concede this. On discovering the inevitable British misdemeanours and failings, the localised disputes and misunderstandings - which included a dangerous

Anglo-Free French confrontation in the Jebel Druse - de Gaulle gave the British authorities a taste of his Cairo performance. Early in August these fresh Gaullist eruptions brought Lyttelton hastening to the scene to impose his edicts upon British field officers and resolve a number of inflamed questions on the spot.

* * *

By mid-August, de Gaulle was able to review a wholesale revision of the Acre Convention and the arrangements for the joint occupation of the Levant States, a revision achieved at the highest official levels and also in the field. De Gaulle was convinced that his intransigence, above all, had brought about these drastic reversals of fortune. Rather unwisely, he expressed this conclusion to Spears, who informed London:

The General confided to me [that] the methods employed by him of late in dealing with us had proved very successful. These he described as extremely firm. Truth compelled me to disillusion him and it had, I said, been very painful to me... to watch antics that had not only generated dislike but caused anxiety concerning his mental balance. 81

Yet there was more truth in de Gaulle's assertion than the sarcastic Spears was prepared to admit. It was de Gaulle who had swooped down from his Brazzaville eyrie and savaged the Acre Convention, magnificently dismissing the fact that his own Plenipotentiary had accepted it. London, while admitting that Allied policy had been violated, had not volunteered to lift a finger in the correction of this agreement. The damage was repaired entirely in the Middle East, and in each case repairs were carried out in the wake of de Gaulle's apocalyptic outbursts. Thus it was almost inevitable that he should attribute his success to a stormy intransigence, and although this was less than fair to Spears and Lyttelton, there was much truth in this conclusion.

It was, however, a dangerous conclusion for General de Gaulle to draw, for it encouraged in him a tendency and a conviction which did great injury to Anglo-Free French relations in the Levant - and elsewhere. This tendency was keenly observed by the British Consul-General in Brazzaville:

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our conduct of the war cannot always conform to [de Gaulle's] own views.... If he is allowed to continue too long in the frame of mind which links [his many] perplexities first to British obtuseness, then to British policy, and finally to British perfidy, he will end by becoming so completely the victim of his own single-mindedness that he will never be able to rid himself of the burden of distrust and dislike of Great Britain which he is at present unconsciously binding on his own shoulders. 82

Something like this was clearly happening to de Gaulle, but it was not all groundless paranoia. His suspicious nature had succumbed to a series of maladroit decisions and actions on the part of the British authorities. The British themselves bore much responsibility for de Gaulle's behaviour and subsequent attitude in the Middle East.

N O T E S

- 1 de Gaulle tel., 29 June 1941, PREM 3 422/6.
- 2 Sir H. Seymour minute, 3 July 1941; Eden minute, 6 July 1941: FO371/27296/E3436.
- 3 Spears tel., (ELS147), 13 June 1941, SPRS IA. Brigadier Clayton was an adviser on Arab affairs at Middle East Command, and was later attached to the office of the Minister of State.
- 4 Spears tel., (ELS 150), 13 June 1941, Ibid., and PREM 3 422/6.
- 5 Spears tel., 14 June 1941, SPRS IA.
- 6 Spears tel., 15 June 1941, Ibid.
- 7 Spears tel., (ELS 160), 16 June 1941, Ibid. and PREM 3 422/6.
- 8 Churchill minute on ELS 160, 18 June 1941, PREM 3 422/6.
- 9 Lampson Diary, 19 June 1941. Extracts from Sir Miles' diaries, edited by Trefor Evans, have been published as The Killearn Diaries, 1934-1946 (London, 1972). Lampson was elevated to the peerage as Lord Killearn in 1943. Extracts quoted here as the Lampson diary are, however, from the original diary and do not appear in the published extracts.
- 10 Lampson tel., 11 June 1941, FO371/27294/E2995.
- 11 Churchill minute, 9 July 1941, PREM 3 422/6 - telegraphed to Lyttelton as FO2387 TWIST, 9 July 1941.
- 12 de Gaulle (Documents), i.168.
- 13 Lampson Diary, 19 June 1941.
- 14 de Gaulle (Documents), i.169f.
- 15 Minutes of the War Cabinet Defence Committee (Operations), 19 June 1941, CAB 69 2/43.
- 16 F.R.U.S., 1941, Vol.III, p.750.
- 17 Spears, Fulfilment, p.116.
- 18 de Gaulle tel., 21 June 1941, SPRS IA.
- 19 Churchill minute, 18 June 1941, PREM 3 422/6.

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- 20 de Gaulle (Documents), i.174, 169, 171.
 - 21 Spears tel., (ELS 168), 20 June 1941, SPRS IA.
 - 22 Foreign Office tel., 2 July 1941, F0371/27297/E3480.
 - 23 Spears Diary, 29 June-8 July, 1941; Spears, Fulfilment, pp. 103-116; no good explanation is given in either source for these solo activities.
 - 24 Crosthwaite minute, 5 July 1941. F0371/27298/E393.
 - 25 Foreign Office tel., 2 July 1941, SPRS IA (E).
 - 26 Wavell tel., 27 June 1941, F0371/27346/E3484.
 - 27 War Office tel., 1 July 1941; W.H. Mack minute, 2 July 1941: F0371/27346/E3484.
 - 28 Wavell tel., 2 July 1941, PREM 3 422/6.
 - 29 Churchill minute, 3 July 1941, Ibid.
 - 30 Eden tel., 3 July 1941, PREM 3 422/6; Oliver Lyttelton Viscount Chandos, The Memoirs of Lord Chandos (1962), p.230.
 - 31 Churchill memorandum, 28 June 1941, CAB 95/8.
 - 32 Lyttelton tel., 9 July 1941, F0371/27298/E3687.
 - 33 Lyttelton tel., 6 July 1941, F0371/27298/E3684.
 - 34 Churchill tel., 7 July 1941, F0371/27298/E3685.
 - 35 Minutes of the War Cabinet Defence Committee (Operations), 9 July 1941, CAB 69/2.
 - 36 Foreign Office tel., 9 July 1941, F0371/27298/E3658.
 - 37 Washington Embassy tel., 9 July 1941, F0371/27299/E3723.
 - 38 Lyttelton tel., 9 July 1941, F0371/27298/E3658.
 - 39 Auchinleck tel., 11 July 1941, F0371/27299/E3723.
 - 40 Auchinleck tel., 11 July 1941, F0371/27299/E3747.
 - 41 Lyttelton tel., 11 July 1941, F0371/27299/E3761.
 - 42 Churchill tel., 12 July 1941, PREM 3 422/6.
 - 43 Lyttelton, p.245f. There is not a word about this, or the whole armistice fiasco, in Churchill's war memoirs.

- 44 Washington Embassy tel., 12 July 1941, F0371/27299/E3784.
- 45 Lyttelton tel., 13 July 1941, F0371/27299/E3797.
- 46 Lyttelton, p.245.
- 47 Auchinleck tel., (O/81317 Part 1), 13 July 1941, F0371/27300/E3877.
- 48 Auchinleck tel., (O/81317 Part 3), 13 July 1941, F0371/27300/E3877.
- 49 Wilson tel., 14 July 1941, F0371/27300/E3877.
- 50 Auchinleck tel., (O/81677), 14 July 1941, F0371/27300/E3877.
- 51 Spears Diary, 17 July 1941; Lyttelton tel., 19 July 1941. F0371/27302/E4062.
- 52 Auchinleck tel., 15 July 1941, F0371/27300/E3970.
- 53 Spears, Fulfilment, p.126.
- 54 Lampson Diary, 1941, p.205.
- 55 Lyttelton, p.247.
- 56 Spears Diary, 14-17 July 1941.
- 57 Spears, Fulfilment, p.129.
- 58 Baxter minute, 14 July 1941, F0371/27300/E3877.
- 59 Eden minute, 15 July 1941, F0371/27300/E3877.
- 60 de Gaulle tel., 16 July 1941, F0371/27301/E4003.
- 61 Eden tel., 17 July 1941, F0371/27301/E4003.
- 62 Churchill minute, 20 July 1941, PREM 3 422/6; Foreign Office tel., 22 July 1941, PREM 3 422/8. Lyttelton's files were destroyed on "Ash Wednesday".
- 63 Spears Diary, 9-17 July 1941.
- 64 Lyttelton tel., 19 July 1941, F0371/27302/E4062.
- 65 Lyttelton tel., 20 July 1941, F0371/27301/E4004.
- 66 Spears, Fulfilment, p.132f. This passage follows the Spears Diary almost to the letter.
- 67 Lyttelton, p.247ff. He was, of course, an old Etonian.

- 68 Spears Diary, 21 July 1941.
- 69 Lyttelton tel., 22 July 1941, F0371/27302/E4044 and PREM 3 422/6.
- 70 Spears Diary, 21 July 1941; Lampson Diary, 21 July 1941.
- 71 Spears Diary, 21 July 1941.
- 72 Lyttelton tel., 22 July 1941, PREM 3 422/6.
- 73 de Gaulle tel., 22 July 1941, F0954/15/i and PREM 3 422/6.
- 74 Churchill tel., 24 July 1941, PREM 3 422/6.
- 75 Spears Diary, 23 July 1941.
- 76 Text in F0371/27302/E4146. The text is also provided, fairly accurately, in the memoirs of both Spears and de Gaulle.
- 77 Spears Diary, 25 July 1941.
- 78 Lyttelton tel., 24 July 1941, PREM 3 422/3.
- 79 de Gaulle tel., 24 July 1941, de Gaulle (Documents), i.198; de Gaulle tel., 25 July 1941, F0371/27302/E4140.
- 80 Free France Delegation tel., 25 July 1941, de Gaulle (Documents), i.199f.
- 81 Spears tel., 16 August 1941, SPRS IC/II and F0371/27346/E4776.
- 82 Parr tel., 26 July 1941, F0892/78.

in spite of all that he did to help us at the start, General Spears was destined one day to turn away from our enterprise and to begin fighting against it.

de Gaulle, i.105

Where civilization entailed the corruption of [indigenous] virtues and the creation of a dependent people, I decided, I was opposed to civilization; and upon this resolution I based the conduct of my administration.

J.M. Coetzee*

De Gaulle was not the only man who hurried to the Levant as soon as the agreements with Lyttelton were settled. On 25 July Spears, who had been asked to establish Anglo-Free-French liaison there (and generally to clean out the Augean stables), left Cairo in "a frenzied rush by air to Jerusalem". The following day he and his little cavalcade of assistants made their way north by road from Jerusalem.¹ It was to be a highly symbolic journey for Spears. Nineteen centuries had passed since another forceful personality had taken the road to Damascus and to a historic change of mind, but even Paul of Tarsus had not repudiated his old cause with such a remorseless consistency as General Spears was to manifest.

In the twelve months preceding the Syrian campaign, Spears had pioneered Anglo-Free French liaison with great vigour and skill.² In 1942, however, a Foreign Office mandarin was complaining about "the sinister influence of that charlatan Spears" who was allegedly working "to smash de Gaulle" and "to wreck Anglo-Free French relations".³

On the face of it, these were incredible and preposterous accusations. Spears had known and loved France all his life. A witty master of French language and literature, he was devoted to the cause of Anglo-French solidarity. Renowned for his liaison work in World War I, he continued to enjoy the friendships formed at that

* Waiting for the Barbarians (1980), p.38.

time with prominent Frenchmen. As Conservative Member for Carlisle from 1931 and a staunch supporter of his old comrade Churchill, Spears was known in Parliament as "the Member for Paris".⁴

In May 1940 he was given the rank of Major-General and became Churchill's envoy to the embattled Reynaud government in France. There Spears was doubly appalled to witness the collapse of his beloved France and the bitter poisoning of Anglo-French relations.⁵ When all was lost, he left Bordeaux with the recently promoted General de Gaulle, identifying with those Frenchmen who had resolved to fight on. As Churchill depicted it, Spears snatched de Gaulle from under the very noses of the Pétainists who would have arrested him. Thus, on 17 June 1940, de Gaulle

drove to the airfield with his friend Spears to see him off. They shook hands and said goodbye, and as the plane began to move de Gaulle stepped in and slammed the door. The machine soared off into the air, while the French police and officials gaped. De Gaulle carried with him, in this small aeroplane, the honour of France. 6 *

Spears carried with him a vision of ongoing French resistance, and played an invaluable part in the launching of the Free French movement. De Gaulle acknowledged that at the beginning, "when so many others considered my enterprise an encumbering adventure, Spears had immediately understood its nature... It was with ardour that he had taken up his mission to deal with Free France and its leader".⁷

Spears threw all his energies into the task of Anglo-Free French liaison. In what he saw as a great common cause, this vigorous man was ready to defy any soldier, politician or civil servant whose parochialism obstructed him. He continually challenged "the conventionality of the official hierarchies", wrote de Gaulle, and "to speed up routine he brought into play his intelligence, the fear inspired by his biting sallies of wit and, lastly, the charm he knew how to display on occasion".⁸ In the year that followed de Gaulle's

* Churchill seems to have used some artistic licence in telling this story. De Gaulle points out that the plane had been placed at his own disposal by Churchill, and writes that Spears declared that he would "accompany" de Gaulle on this plane back to England. "There was nothing romantic or difficult about the departure", according to de Gaulle. - de Gaulle, i.86.

dramatic opening broadcast of 18 June 1940, Spears was tireless in his commitment to the Anglo-Free French war effort.

And yet, for all his shining record as a Francophile and a vigorous champion of Free France, the truth was that by the end of July 1941, Spears was deeply disillusioned with de Gaulle and the Free French. He certainly made no secret of his disenchantment. General Wilson observed that "within a few weeks of the signing of the Armistice at Acre [Spears] suddenly turned bitterly anti-French. Up to that time nothing could be too good for them".⁹ During the latter stages of the Lyttelton-de Gaulle negotiations in Cairo, Lampson noticed "at each interview [that Spears] is the most violently in favour of having done with de Gaulle once and for all.... Spears struck me as very bellicosely minded vis-a-vis de Gaulle. I told him I thought he ought to go slow".¹⁰ Spears himself admitted that he was "aggressive" towards de Gaulle and had taken him on and "stirred him up".¹¹

It is evident that Spears' Francophilia had been subjected to tremendous strains, and de Gaulle's savage assault on all things British was the last straw. Since the fall of France, Spears' whole pro-French world-view had been propped up by the Free French movement, which for a time softened the blow of 1940:

The French defeat had been to me very like a personal humiliation. I had been bewildered, for the French soldier of the First World War had been my pal....

I had a horrible vision of the great Nazi banners.... I wondered if Paris could survive such a desecration, and felt that if it happened she would never again be the same to me. 12

Spears was, as Sachar suggests, a somewhat Quixotic man.* Shocked and repelled, he viewed the fallen France as a chivalrous knight viewed the violation of his betrothed. But for a time the pure and

* Sachar, p.289. Concerning the fall of France, Spears wrote of Weygand: "no solution occurred to him. The splendour of fighting to the end à la Vercingetorix was a vision not vouchsafed to him"; and of Pétain himself, "If the old man persisted in believing all was lost, I hoped to win him over to the thesis that we should at least die well, mourir en beauté". - Assignment to Catastrophe, ii.20, 83. What Spears was suggesting on such occasions is almost incredible and is certainly Quixotic, to say the least.

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heroic concept of Free France preserved in Spears' mind the honour of France, and held off the full effect of his repulsion and contempt for

that strange class of Frenchmen who had developed a vigour in defeat which had not been apparent when they were defending their country, and... embraced their downfall as if it was a new religion of which Pétain was the Prophet and Laval the High Priest. 13

This precarious state of mind could not last, for it required Free French efforts and interests to be practically identical to those of the British, and wholly separate from the sordid pursuits of the Vichy people. These twin assumptions were duly shattered. They went down before the visible, and ineluctable, expansion of de Gaulle's political consciousness. He was "inevitably moving beyond the position where his sole concern was to make war, and [was] harassed by the political problems bound up with military decisions".¹⁴ Spears himself had noticed the contrast between his own and de Gaulle's approach to the Levant States. "He was absorbed by calculations of how his own movement and France would be affected if they rallied to his cause. I was interested only in the extent to which the British cause would be strengthened".¹⁵ Spears' disillusioning was almost completed during a row over London's abortive armistice terms of 19 June:

"You think I am interested in England winning the war? [said de Gaulle] I am not. I am only interested in France's victory". "They are the same", I retorted. "Not at all", he answered, "not at all in my view".

Spears confessed himself "taken aback" by this drastic statement. De Gaulle repeated these views in a particularly offensive way in July, first to Spears and then in his explosive confrontation of Lyttelton.¹⁶

Spears had taken enough, and he came out fighting. To add insult to injury, de Gaulle was abusing the only two Britons who had, on their own initiative, tried to do anything to help the Free French recover some of the ground they had lost at Acre. For their pains they were hearing themselves and their embattled country reviled by a Frenchman

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whose organisation and position depended largely upon British assistance. This was too much for Spears, a man of Churchillian patriotism who, despite his own flair for deadly sarcasm, was deeply sensitive to personal criticism, ingratitude or any failure to recognise his efforts.* To the astonishment of his colleagues, among whom he had always been the Francophile par excellence, he began to lash out at de Gaulle. Something of the resentment, bitterness and sarcasm with which he retaliated have been preserved in this passage:

Truth compelled me to disillusion [de Gaulle] and it had, I said, been very painful to me who had helped build him up as an international figure to watch antics that had not only generated dislike but caused anxiety concerning his mental balance. 17

As one of Spears' confidants had noted, he was beginning to favour the removal of de Gaulle. In reporting the Frenchman's reluctance to accept British martial law (despite the clear case for this in the agreements he had just signed with Lyttelton), Spears wired on 5 August:

General de Gaulle would... do a Samson act and threaten to bring down the Free French movement....

The threat is no doubt serious, but perhaps not serious enough to risk jeopardising our... position in the Middle East or in the Arab world.

If de Gaulle ceased to be prepared to act as our ally we should have in mind someone else whom we could recognise as leader of the Free French. 18

This idea originated on the afternoon of 21 July, when Spears had been prepared to "depose de Gaulle and inform the whole Free French

* Here are two examples of this characteristic, taken from Spears' diary. The first refers back to the work done by Spears during the fall of France: "I am fed up, working very hard and no thank you's. R. Campbell [was] covered with flowers and I did most of the work at Bordeaux". (15 June 1941). And in Damascus, during Operation Exporter: "Rather annoyed no sign made me when great fuss made about Jumbo Wilson. . . [was] told my appointment [with Catroux] put off till 8.30 - Took A.D.C. apart and said I was Ambassador to Free France. [Catroux] came personally to apologise [and I said] I thought Britain had always looked after de Gaulle and him well.... He is giving me his own office in the town". (1 July 1941). - Spears Diary, SPRS I.

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movement that all pay and emoluments would be made through Catroux".¹⁹

Spears' priorities on 5 August contrast sharply with his previous approach to the Levant enterprise: as late as 8 July he declared that "the Syrians should clearly understand we are wholeheartedly backing the Free French.... the whole cause of Free France is in the balance. The great chance of the movement is [to] make a good job of Syria". Moreover, Spears had opined,

If we take over effective control of Syria with a mere Free French facade De Gaulle and his men will be finally classified as British mercenaries. I can guarantee that the morale of the Free French Forces... will fall to pieces if their belief that they are engaged in a French Crusade...is shattered. 20

The distance between this attitude and the views he expressed in August reveal something of the remarkable transformation which Spears had undergone, something of the fateful road he had travelled. The concept of a "French Crusade" certainly tells us more about Spears than it does about the mentality of the Free French troops, not to mention some of their officers.* The great change evident in all his communications after July confirms the conclusion best stated in his own words: "A lifetime steeped in French feeling, sentiment and affection was falling from me. England alone counted now".†

De Gaulle's own attitude to Spears' activities likewise indicates that the two men fell out after the Lyttelton-de Gaulle

* Ironically, this does not apply to de Gaulle himself, who had indeed embarked on a sort of crusade to save France. But his approach to this staggering task necessarily owed more to Machiavelli than Don Quixote, and Spears could not stomach some of the means, or the personnel, used to this end.

† Assignment to Catastrophe, ii.47f. Spears penned these words in the context of the fall of France, but he wrote in 1954 and the whole book is pervaded with the hindsight of disenchantment and contempt. Although this process began with the fall of France, Spears' words belong most of all to the summer of 1941.

confrontation. As late at 18 July - and this at a time when de Gaulle was enraged by the Acre Convention - he informed Lyttelton that

I am happy to learn that Major-General Spears would be in charge of arranging British liaison with the French Delegate-General in Syria Lebanon [sic]. Spears has often proved to me his comprehension and ability. 21

But by mid-August de Gaulle was thoroughly alarmed at the prospect of Spears being stationed in the Levant. On 15 August Lyttelton informed Churchill of de Gaulle's intention to "ask that someone other than Spears should head the Mission in Syria and perhaps that there should be a new head of the whole Mission.... [He] maintains that Spears misled him... by sending him at Brazzaville a reassuring telegram about the armistice terms".^{22*} Given Spears' Herculean labours for Free France, this was a shabby excuse for such a drastic request, and de Gaulle himself knew, from the subsequent explanations in Cairo, that Spears' telegram was sent in good faith and was only rendered misleading by the unexpected follies of Wilson in Acre. His real reason was that he and Spears had fallen out, and de Gaulle was rapidly realising the extent of Spears' disenchantment with Free France. "He looks askance at this mission", reported Spears on 16 August, [and is] genuinely perturbed by fear he might become estranged from me".²³ And Spears recorded that de Gaulle

had pressed me to return to London saying that we had worked up the Free French movement together and it was a pity to stop. When I told him I must obey my orders he evidently made up his mind that I would represent something much too strong... 24

What he later described as "the insane assaults of de Gaulle's ugly temper" had brought Spears, with a profound shock, to the end of a long road.²⁵ Free France was the only device preserving his pro-French mentality from the repulsion he felt at the sordid

* Lyttelton went on to defend Spears.

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and sorry spectacle of Vichy - and now his vision of Free France was disintegrating. Like a dam through which a hole has been torn, his Quixotic vision broke under pressures it could no longer resist. As Spears began to tackle affairs in the Levant - a hotbed of corruption, exploitation and opportunism - his old distinction between Vichyites and Free Frenchmen broke down utterly. This breakdown completed the disintegration of Spears' French-flavoured world and his bitter separation from the Cross of Lorraine.

* * *

The French mandates of Syria and Lebanon were no place for an idealist who called France "that beautiful and gallant embodiment of all civilisation".²⁶ Conversely they were the perfect place for an ex-Francophile to be finally convinced that his affections had been misplaced. For the Free French, unable to provide the manpower necessary to run the two countries, had fallen back upon the old (Vichy) administrators, removing only a handful of the most notorious Axis sympathisers. The remainder "rallied" to Free France and generally were confirmed in their old positions, to the consternation of the Syrians and Lebanese.^{*} The result, as before, was a "shockingly bad administration" stocked by "third rate" personnel.²⁷

The disposition of these so-called 'ralliés du biftek' was, from an Allied point of view, dubious. Slim recalled a classic case. After his capture of Deir es Zor, he inspected a parade of local officials:

I caught sight of a French officer in uniform standing at the back.... When I reached him, it was explained to me that up to a couple of hours ago he had been the Vichy chief of police; he was still the chief of police but... was now a staunch de Gaullist. I was a little suspicious of so speedy and opportune a conversion and resolved to keep an eye on him. 28

* Some did not even rally, and remained in the anomalous position of Vichyites temporarily co-operating with Free France in order to keep up the French position - and their own.

Slim's feelings can readily be imagined, and yet there was no real alternative available at the time. Neither the Syrians and Lebanese nor the British could have provided the number of trained personnel required to step into all these positions, even if the Free French had been ready to accept this drastic turnover.²⁹ De Gaulle and his subordinates flatly rejected any such suggestion, of course, and were largely blamed for the process by which, in local terms, Free France simply became Vichy writ large.

Spears himself was predictably disgusted with the spectacle of the so-called Free French administration of the Levant States. "From the first", wrote Sir Geoffrey Furlonge, "Spears had seen, and reports from all over the country confirmed, that a majority of the local populations only wanted to be quit of the French". Spears quickly became an "enthusiast for the cause of Syrian and Lebanese independence". His zeal was intensified not only "by his personal quarrel with de Gaulle" but also "by the attitude of the local Free French, many of them former Vichyists". This Instant Gaullist administration, acutely sensitive to the charge of "selling out" the French position, over-compensated in their endeavour to refute this accusation:

they adopted an exaggerated position in which every evidence of French control or power was emphasised and every British action or achievement denigrated or suppressed, which was galling.

This attitude enraged Spears and rapidly finished off his old distinction between Vichy and Free Frenchmen in the worst possible way, in that he now regarded Free France (at least in the Levant) as no better than Vichy. The result was highly significant. "Within a few weeks of Spears' arrival... no one under his orders was any longer urging the locals to come to agreement with the French on the lines London had laid down".³⁰

Spears quickly became a champion of Syrian and Lebanese independence, confounding the expectations of all who knew his

previous record. Thus in August 1941 Furlonge went to meet Spears with "considerable apprehension" on account of Spears' Francophile reputation. Furlonge himself, after seven years in Beirut, was no great admirer of the French Mandate, and he told Spears "quite frankly" what he thought of the French in the Levant. To his surprise, however, Spears was most receptive: "I was encouraged to find him very sympathetic", Furlonge recalled.³¹

It was not only his escalating feud with de Gaulle and his contempt for the French authorities which drew Spears to the cause of Syrian and Lebanese nationalism. It would be wrong to interpret all his subsequent actions simply in terms of a personal vendetta, for there was a positive side to the coin as well. This was Spears' emergence as a genuine and zealous Arabophile, which he was to remain for the rest of his life. The Arab world* was new to Spears, and his introduction and first impressions were rendered more favourable by his British advisers, and by the Levantines themselves, the latter employing a judicious and effective flattery.³² Arab civilisation - which had once spread as far as France - had nothing to learn from the French about protocol and hospitality, and this point was not lost on Spears. He warmed to his new environment, and the aspirations of the Syrians and Lebanese, who presented themselves as the victims of French oppression, proved irresistible to him.

Here was job satisfaction with a vengeance, for Spears had been placed at the sharp end of the British determination to see that the Free French promise of independence was honestly carried out. The nationalist movement filled to perfection the vacuum left by his old ideals, while British policy (or rather part of it) gave him a charter to pursue his new cause. The

* For present purposes, terms like 'the Arab world' are meant to include the Lebanese. Although the Lebanon was in one sense a Christian enclave, this proved to be surprisingly irrelevant in the whole question of the struggle for independence from France. To the immense discomfort of the French, it was the Lebanese nationalists - both Christian and Muslim - who precipitated the first great confrontation with Free France in 1943.

Levantines encouraged Spears to see himself as their champion, and he was to play this part with a vigour they could scarcely have anticipated. While this role required Spears to throw down the gauntlet to the French, which he did with considerable panache, there can be no doubt that he supported the Syrians and Lebanese out of genuine conviction, which was no less real for being recent. His was the zeal of the new convert: the man who professed himself "fed up" in June was once again a man with a mission.³³ He had not been hatched out in a chancery (as he scornfully wrote of one of his Foreign Office adversaries) and he had little time for the career diplomat's watchword, point de zèle.^{*} A warrior rather than a diplomat, he had found a cause to fight for and an underdog to defend.

This is not to imply that Spears was simply a naïve zealot who rode forth indiscriminately to launch himself against the nearest windmill. The Arab world had a most persuasive case to present to any Englishman with a sense of justice. There was some truth in Churchill's complaint that every Briton in the Middle East ended up as a partisan of the Arabs. (though Churchill himself seemed reluctant to explore this phenomenon).³⁴ The Arabs, despite their military and political weakness, had maintained much of their rich and noble civilisation, and few educated men were able to resist its fascination and diversity. It was therefore a standing rebuke to British Arabists that their own country had dealt so shabbily with these people in the settlements that followed World War I. "It was all pretty immoral", concluded Spears, joining a great chorus of British Arabists: "there can be no doubt that the pledge [of independence] to the Arabs was quite unambiguous and was clearly violated by the creation of Mandates".³⁵

Despite the violent controversy over Palestine, the French mandates of Syria and Lebanon were in many ways the most

* "Oliver Harvey, pale, correct, obviously hatched out in a chancery" - Spears, Assignment to Catastrophe, ii.185.

blatant case of aggrandizement in the Middle East, and they had been ruled with an amazing cultural arrogance in the name of France's 'civilising mission'. This was inevitably conveyed to Spears as he formed his first impressions of the Levant situation and its place in the Arab world.* In this process, his British advisers played a significant part by providing Spears with an overview of his new parish. While his response to the situation was strongly coloured by his own characteristics, it was his British advisers who gave Spears his fundamental interpretation and analysis of the Levant and, indeed, the whole question of Britain's role in the Arab world. Spears thus gained the benefit of their combined knowledge and understanding, which was vast - and inextricably woven into this overview was a sympathy for the nationalist cause and a marked disapproval of the French attitude in the Levant.

This is not to suggest that anything as sinister and calculated as an Arabist conspiracy (as in Gaullist demonology) was at work in these briefings and discussions. It is clear, however, that the speed with which Spears made up his mind about the Levant owed much to his local advisers. Of these, the most important were Furlonge (Beirut) and Gardiner (Damascus), while John Hamilton, a noted Arabist, helped Spears to complete his wider picture of the Middle East. Hamilton at one stage was considered for Spears' own job in the Levant, but as Spears noted, "His knowledge of Arabs [is] a positive disadvantage...it will make the French suspicious". Spears liked and admired Hamilton, and took him along as his assistant and adviser on Arab questions.³⁶

Gardiner and Furlonge, the senior British consular officials in Syria and Lebanon respectively, gave Spears an indispensable introduction to local affairs and personalities,

* Although Spears had spent 2-3 July talking to Syrian notables in Damascus, and although one had opined that "to treat with Free France is only to treat with individuals", Spears had concluded that well-meaning Englishmen only made trouble for Free France by meddling with Syrian grievances. It was weeks later that Spears began to view the French mandate in a completely different light. - Spears Diary, 1-5 July, SPRS I.

as Spears soon acknowledged. "Gardiner is rendering very noteworthy services", he informed London on 12 September: "I can say the same of Colonel Furlonge at Beirut... His intimate knowledge of the country and its personalities has been of the greatest use to me. I deem myself extremely fortunate in having found here two such valuable collaborators!".³⁷ Furlonge, the only survivor of Spears' main advisory trio, recently commented on their early collaboration. Spears, he said, "needed very badly local guidance" and on receiving it he "picked up the whole situation quickly". Furlonge's acquaintance with Lebanese personalities was put to practical effect: "I was able to pick out... people like Chamoun and introduce them to Spears", Furlonge recalled, adding that Spears very soon established a rapport with these up-and-coming nationalists.³⁸ Spears was clearly indebted to his Arabist advisers for the way in which he quickly grasped the situation and decided what his own stance was to be.

* * *

In August 1941 the new General Spears emerged. His rift with de Gaulle widened into a great gulf as the two men clashed head-on in the Levant, and his attitude to the Vichy French spilled over into a contempt for the Free French as he beheld the former become the latter throughout the Levant. At the same time the dubious nature of this administration was underlined by the grievances of the Syrians and Lebanese themselves, which Spears heard with increasing sympathy as a fuller picture of the situation was unfolded to him. He emerged as a whole-hearted Arabophile, warmly disposed towards the leading nationalist figures and convinced that British policy (and British interests) required him to espouse their cause by coaxing some genuine form of independence from the reluctant and suspicious French. As early as

5 August Spears was suggesting that Britain's Arab position had to be preserved, even if it meant the collapse of Free France.*

This profound personal transition occurred in the midst of the utmost turmoil and frantic activity in the Levant. With his customary vigour Spears threw himself into the task of creating some kind of order, at least in British affairs. From the first he was necessarily more than a liaison man, acting in effect as Lyttelton's lieutenant in the Levant and asserting an authority that far exceeded the limits suggested by his official role. Spears was not the man to sit back and stoically observe chaos. Employing his considerable air of authority he plunged into action, now pulling his military rank, now invoking Lyttelton's Cabinet authority.

As early as 17 July Spears had told London how he saw his imminent task, describing the Levantine upheaval in extravagant terms and implying the need to assert wide authority there:

Success difficult to achieve. Disaster possible. If my relationship with the Minister of State were interfered with, would feel unable to undertake this most difficult task.

The problem is

- (a) to prevent the country going up in smoke,
- (b) to help to make out of Syria a solid bloc which will provide a safe base for our armed forces...

This object is to be achieved in a country where

- (a) native interests often are [conflicting]
- (b) Population is now to a great extent armed.
- (c) French of all categories intensely disliked.
- (d) Free French very jealous of the British.
- (e) Free French authorities are often in conflict with each other.
- (f) Complete dearth of administration officials.
- (g) A great many British unconnected elements intensely distrusted by the French upon whom the natives will endeavour to play.

Out of this some order is to be created keeping the country as French as possible while safeguarding vital British interests.

* See page 126.

Above all it is necessary to avoid civil disturbances which [might] spread beyond Syria and [necessitate] using force against those very Arabs whose goodwill we are so anxious to cultivate.

Spears added that if de Gaulle was given a free hand in the Levant in his current mood "the country would be out of hand within a fortnight". Having defined a situation which clearly required his special qualifications, Spears bluntly concluded his tour de force: "I repeat that I could not think of undertaking [such a task] unless I felt that the Minister,... who is aware of local conditions, gave me my directives without outside interference". The Foreign Office, for the time being, took the hint.³⁹

Having secured his base and protected his rear, General Spears advanced into the complications of the Levant. He was faced immediately with a dangerous Anglo-Free French confrontation in the inflammable Druse country, and another shouting match with de Gaulle in Beirut. The Jebel Druse, ever a highly sensitive issue between the British and French, was the subject of a special section of the Lyttelton-de Gaulle agreements which called for Catroux to concert with Wilson on all important measures relating to order and security there. Wilson had sent a British brigade to occupy Soueida, the main Druse centre, and this force had duly occupied the French Residency and hoisted the Union Jack in place of the tricolour. This unfortunate performance, indicative of the thoughtlessness which prevailed before the Lyttelton-de Gaulle terms could be translated into realities, enraged de Gaulle and Catroux. The latter, clearly stiffened by de Gaulle's presence, promptly despatched a Free French battalion to Soueida without consulting Wilson. The two forces were soon confronting each other and a conflict seemed likely.

Its verbal equivalent certainly broke out between Spears and de Gaulle when the latter ventilated his feelings about the situation. "The conversation", Spears informed Lyttelton, "took

on the tone of your first meeting with the General. He gave every evidence of having lost control and declared brutally that this was just another [British] plot".⁴⁰ A month earlier Spears would have deplored Wilson's procedure in the Jebel Druse and leapt to the defence of Free French interests, but now, as his diary reveals, he saw the affair as a challenge to British authority:

I sent...a message through Catroux...that either French troops marching into Soueida were under British command, in which case they were guilty of an act of indiscipline... or the Free French were a completely independent force, in which case I did not see why the British Government should be responsible for the [ir] pay.....

This message reached de Gaulle as well as the Free French commander in Soueida, and its belligerence, combined with the tough attitude of the British commander in Soueida, showed de Gaulle that he was up against a stiffer combination than the British had proved to be in Cairo. According to the disgusted Spears, de Gaulle

was on the point of giving way when I heard that orders had come to [the British commander in Soueida] to hoist down his flag and evacuate the Residency. The position has thus been incredibly badly handled and de Gaulle will have the impression that once again he has, by holding out, scored over us. 41

This retreat, as Spears saw it, reflected the instructions sent by Lyttelton in response to the report of de Gaulle's fresh grievances. The Minister of State had evidently decided to show the "soldiers" where they got off. Spears was therefore told to

discuss with Wilson de Gaulle's statement that obstacles are being placed in his way by British military authorities.... Wilson should ensure that nothing of the kind takes place [and] issue categorical instructions to all concerned to collaborate fully with the Free French and give generous effect to their wishes whenever possible, and make it perfectly clear in their general attitude that Free French are our allies and friends. 42 *

* Mickelsen consistently omits this kind of statement. See Appendix D.

Spears received this telegram at Ain Sofar, Wilson's pleasant headquarters in the cool mountain slopes above Beirut, and passed on its galling contents to the British Commander-in-Chief, who duly ordered his Brigadier to pull out of the Residency in Soueida.

Three days later Catroux arrived in Ain Sofar for talks with Wilson and Spears. (The latter's mood was not improved by an illness which had kept him hors de combat for two days). The conference of 2 August revolved around the implementation of the command arrangements made in the Lyttelton-de Gaulle agreements. In the previous week de Gaulle had gone so far as to renounce any British right to impose martial law, and claimed that French troops were no longer under British command because the Syrian campaign was over. This clearly broke the Cairo agreements, and to the astonishment of Wilson and Spears, Catroux baldly reiterated de Gaulle's views and stated that "there is no reason why the British military authorities should have any special rights". The meeting lasted from 8.30 a.m. to 1 p.m. and got practically nowhere. Spears was amazed by Catroux's uncharacteristic mettle and wrongly assumed that the Frenchman was merely "so frightened of General de Gaulle that he is standing up to us in a way he has never done before and against his own better judgment". At this point Spears lost his temper and dispensed with the Queensberry rules: "I hit him on the raw by reminding him that the British Treasury, which was paying for everything, might have something to say. [He] answered in an offended way that... France would pay all she owed in the end".⁴³

These abortive discussions made it painfully clear that the Lyttelton-de Gaulle agreements had not even begun to apply in the Levant. The Free French, on discovering that they were not taken seriously by the British occupying authorities, had responded drastically. De Gaulle was not the man to wait patiently while changes decided in Cairo percolated slowly through to British officers in the Levant. Nor did he have much faith that

this process had even been set in motion. He regarded the Levant situation as a breach of the Lyttelton-de Gaulle agreements, and responded by repudiating other sections of the agreements in a manner calculated to cause maximum inconvenience. His rejection of British command threatened to create the very situation which Spears and Lyttelton had laboured to avoid in Cairo. As Spears noted at Ain Sofar: "we are still up against this question of command and I do not see how we can avoid having a showdown in imposing our will - but Lyttelton will have to do this".⁴⁴

In this instance, however, de Gaulle had a shrewder understanding of Lyttelton, for the Minister was thoroughly fed up with Wilson's men, he was sensitive to the implication that he had not followed through his deal with de Gaulle, and he was inclined to see Gaullist difficulties in a more sympathetic light. Free French tactics worked: within a week Lyttelton arrived in the Levant to enforce his edicts and patch up relations with de Gaulle. He also had a bone to pick with the Vichy Generals, and these two purposes mingled in his approach to the latest troubles. "The British", he recalled, referring to Wilson's officers, "seemed at the time to be more in sympathy with the regular Vichy officers... than with the Free French".⁴⁵

Lyttelton was having none of this. In the presence of Wilson he reprimanded the Vichy head of the Armistice Commission for a number of abuses, and rebuked Wilson for his indulgence towards the Vichy officers at the expense of the Free French. The most serious offence had occurred when the Vichyists shipped some fifty British officers to France on the eve of the armistice. On London's authority Lyttelton ordered the arrest of Dentz himself, pending the return of the British prisoners. This had the desired effect.

Having made his displeasure clear to Wilson, Lyttelton turned his attention to de Gaulle, who was partially mollified by the Minister's firm handling of Dentz and the British military clique. There were some awkward questions to be dealt with, and Lyttelton's determination to meet Free French requirements wherever possible led to some fresh concessions. Spears was considerably irked:

Lyttelton...was so evidently anxious to propitiate de Gaulle, so determined to avert at all costs a repetition of the [clash] in Cairo, that...I became quite critical of the manner in which, together with bons mots, he threw bouquet after bouquet at de Gaulle in the best battle of flowers style. 46

To Spears' disgust, Lyttelton conceded one of the command points which Catroux and de Gaulle had so hotly disputed with him. It was henceforth accepted by the British that martial law could only be imposed by the civil authority, namely Catroux. Britain's military position in relation to the Free French now depended purely upon the Lyttelton-de Gaulle agreements "and a further agreement of 9th August".⁴⁷ Lyttelton rounded off his dealings with de Gaulle by means of another letter, repeating "the assurances that Great Britain has no interest in Syria or the Lebanon, except to win the war" and extending to Free France "our full sympathy and support".⁴⁸

These delicate and crucial negotiations, conducted in de Gaulle's Beirut office, did not pass without an absurd reminder of the British army's indulgent attitude to Vichy officers. Down at the harbour, de Verdilhac himself was being farewelled in fine style. His arrival was heralded by an Australian military band doing the Marseillaise. The strains of this performance echoed through the streets of Beirut, interrupting de Gaulle in mid-sentence, but at the quayside the show went on. Two strapping companies of Australian infantry, each one flanked by one of de Verdilhac's female friends, awaited the Frenchman's inspection. De Verdilhac cheerfully saluted the guard of honour, kissed each lady, stepped aboard and gave one final salute to the British staff officers, who seemed pleased. Once more a zealous version of the Marseillaise reverberated through Beirut, to the acute embarrassment of Lyttelton, who had now heard the cause of all the fanfare. So had de Gaulle. "The British are incomprehensible!" he cried in exasperation. Lyttelton, who had just arrested de Verdilhac's superior, could only agree. No doubt the Australian infantry expressed similar views, in their pithy way.⁴⁹

This quayside comedy was indicative of the stark contrast between the treatment of the Free French and the silly chivalry extended to Vichy officers, who had just fought the British with a

ferocity seldom evident in 1940. It certainly confirmed Lyttelton's decision to see some of the British commanders scattered throughout the Levant and personally stress the status which the Free French should be accorded. His travels took him as far as Deir es Zor, on the distant Euphrates. There he found General Slim ensconced in the French Residency and flying the Union Jack. He also found another guest - the Free French Resident-elect. This man was treated with a friendly courtesy by Slim's staff, but it was clear that nobody had realised, or been instructed, that the guest should have been the host. Lyttelton enjoyed meeting Slim, but remembered his mission:

I told the General that I feared he would have to move out of the Residency before long, and hoist the French rather than the British flag. He looked a little grim, but saw the point.

Before leaving, Lyttelton had a rare opportunity to see things through Free French eyes. A friendly Gaullist showed him the latest guidelines issued to Free French officers concerning the British in Syria. The latter were divided into three: 'les gentlemen', who were trustworthy; 'les good fellows', an unknown quantity; and 'les gens de l'intelligence service', a sinister and ubiquitous corps of Arab sympathisers! It was a quaint but grim reminder of Gaullist anxieties.⁵⁰

Before returning to Cairo, Lyttelton took one further measure to reduce misunderstandings about the British presence in Syria. Since February there had been increasing British activity among the Druse and the desert tribes, and this had reached a peak by July, as Glubb's Arab Legion and other elements operated in Syria. The work of Glubb and Kirkbride was extended by other Arabist officers, who distributed large sums of money in continuation of Kirkbride's approaches in the Jebel Druse. This had led Spears to complain, before his break with de Gaulle, that there were too many would-be Lawrences at large.

De Gaulle had left Lyttelton in no doubt that the Free French viewed these activities in the worst possible light. The Minister, assuring de Gaulle that they were the result of crossed wires rather than some vast British plot, lost no time in putting some teeth into his assurances. He gave instructions that Glubb should for the moment

return to Amman, and that the British agents in the Jebel Druse should clear out of Syria altogether. "The French", he informed London, "allege that Glubb in particular has been very active in saying that French control of the Desert is a thing of the past". To reassure de Gaulle, Lyttelton asked Wilson to send Glubb back to Transjordan.⁵¹ Given Glubb's military services since the Iraqi revolt, London found this order a little harsh, and Lyttelton was obliged to explain himself further: "I share your regret that it is inadvisable for [Glubb] to re-visit Syria at present", he replied. "But for [now his] presence in Syria would be so misinterpreted by Free French as to defeat its object. French suspicions of British policy in Syria are unfortunately of long standing".⁵² *

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Back in Cairo by mid-August, Lyttelton reported to London that de Gaulle was now "almost persuaded that His Majesty's Government intends to play straight with Free France in Syria".⁵³ This gave no visible satisfaction to Churchill, who wanted to know whether de Gaulle intended to play straight with Britain. In London there was a first-class row brewing over de Gaulle's Syrian antics, and the unlucky Lyttelton - who had really done well - found himself out of step with his own Prime Minister. On the assumption that he could satisfy de Gaulle and settle any anomalies in the Levant, Lyttelton had bravely shelved several stiff warnings which Churchill had addressed to de Gaulle. This was much too optimistic, as de Gaulle's own words reveal. Reporting

* During a mid-September visit to Amman, Lyttelton took the opportunity to explain the position personally to Glubb. The Minister had to make this next journey to assure the Amir's Government that Transjordan was not being left behind in the current political evolution. Lyttelton did this by frankly pointing out that places like Iraq and Syria, where the mandates were supposedly ended, were no more independent than Transjordan! - See "Note of discussion between the Minister of State and the Prime Minister of Trans-Jordan" in C0831/59/77241; Lyttelton, Chandos, p.255ff.

to Free French headquarters on 12 August, he claimed that the British showed "no knowledge of the Lyttelton-de Gaulle agreement" until the Minister's personal visit:

He expressed many regrets to me and has given such orders that things are now at last taking an acceptable turn....

But there is at work in this country a fanatical group of British Arabophiles supported by the Prime Minister and the Colonial Office. [They] saw in the Syrian affair the opportunity for driving France out...

The part played in this affair by Spears has been altogether mischievous and disquieting... 54

These embedded suspicions and exaggerated grievances were not to be removed by brief discussions and a few sharp orders to his subordinates, as Lyttelton soon learned when de Gaulle lapsed into public Anglophobia before the month was out. The subsequent row in London, and the shots fired by Churchill, had a most significant effect in the Levant. They restored the initiative to Spears and powerfully encouraged his pro-Arab stance after the dampening effects of Lyttelton's intervention.

Hearing of de Gaulle's wrathful descent upon the Levant, Churchill had warned that if the Frenchman created any dangerous situation in the Levant, Anglo-Free French relations in toto could be destroyed: "It might be well if you could let him see the gulf on the edge of which he is disporting himself", he told Lyttelton.⁵⁵ This message came just before Lyttelton's departure for Beirut, but he considered its contents ill-timed. Thereafter Churchill was further annoyed to receive yet another Gaullist demand that no more Vichy troops be shipped home. De Gaulle could not believe that most of the Vichy soldiers preferred to go home, and this wire denounced the British for preventing all contact between Vichy and Free French troops. Churchill dismissed the charge as "insolent", directing his staff to add this telegram to a growing file of de Gaulle's transgressions.⁵⁶

Towards the end of August de Gaulle came through Cairo en route to Brazzaville and London, and was tackled by Lyttelton, who now wished to correct his over-conciliatory image. "I... took the opportunity of questioning him closely about the [independence] negotiations in Syria and his future intentions", Lyttelton told Churchill. De Gaulle, who resented this monitoring, retorted that "the Arab world as a whole was more concerned with the Jewish question in Palestine than with matters of Syrian negotiations. I had no difficulty in hitting his half-volley out of the ground", Lyttelton boasted, though some might have called it a bouncer.

He had already reported de Gaulle's latest surprise move, which was to forbid Catroux to have any dealings with him. De Gaulle argued that Lyttelton was the War Cabinet incarnate and should therefore deal with the leader of Free France, not his subordinates; thus, while de Gaulle was in London, he could discuss any important matter with the British Government itself, of which Lyttelton was simply a distant representative. Referring to this again, the Minister opined that "orders given to Catroux... are a prelude to some manoeuvres in London as a result of which de Gaulle hopes he will be able to get concessions...over my head". Churchill immediately replied that

any difficulties you have had with de Gaulle are due to his belief that he has me on his side...but his recent conduct has affected my relations with him. I regret that you did not convey to him... the note of warning which I struck.

And the following day, 28 August, Churchill amplified this statement in a further reply: "If de Gaulle interview at Brazzaville is authentic, he has clearly gone off his head. This would be a very good riddance. [De Gaulle, on reaching Brazzaville, had aired his Anglophobia to an American journalist and was even quoted as saying that England was afraid of Darlan's fleet] De Gaulle has put himself entirely out of court".⁵⁷

Churchill had now come very close to severing his relations with de Gaulle altogether, a course which Spears was continuing to suggest. Even the Foreign Office jettisoned its customary restraint in a memo to Churchill on the subject of de Gaulle's behaviour in Syria:

de Gaulle has been the cause of much difficulty and friction since the end of the Syrian campaign... [His] chief concern [was] to insist on French interests in Syria to the exclusion of all other considerations. He re-appointed numerous Vichy officials who were avowedly anti-British and who were mistrusted and disliked by the local inhabitants, because he preferred to use doubtful Frenchmen rather than reliable Englishmen... [His] return had the effect of stiffening the attitude of General Catroux, who...had shown greater readiness to co-operate...

This account would have given Spears as much satisfaction as he derived from Churchill's response, for the summary concluded:

Most of these difficulties have been ironed out by [Lyttelton]. This happy result, according to de Gaulle, was only achieved by his firmness... which enabled him to obtain 90% of his demands. This statement...compelled General Spears to inform him that his extraordinary behaviour had... caused doubts about his mental stability.⁵⁸

Spears could not have wished to be quoted at a better time. The above report confirmed Churchill's decision to fire a Parliamentary broadside at de Gaulle's pretensions in the Levant. On 2 September, the day after this memo, he sent his proposed statement to the Foreign Office. Churchill's draft was volleyed backwards and forwards by the Whitehall mandarins until Cadogan, who had minuted that "I am not quite clear what it means", decided that it was all right!

On 9 September, therefore, Churchill stood up in the House of Commons and defined the British position on the Levant question.* "Syria shall be handed back to the Syrians", he declared, "who will assume at the earliest possible moment their independent sovereign rights. We do not propose that this process of creating an

* Churchill persistently referred to the Levant States as "Syria".

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independent Syrian Government shall wait till the end of the war.... There is no question of France maintaining the same position which she exercised in Syria before the war". And, having repeated Britain's disinterest and her acceptance of a certain French privilege in the Levant, the Prime Minister warned:

There must be no question even in wartime of a mere substitution of Free French interests for Vichy French interests. The Syrian peoples are to come back into their own. 59

This, as the Foreign Office officials had expected, was not at all to de Gaulle's liking. "The same British circles...are still at work, even here", he informed Catroux from London. "The speech made yesterday by Churchill...is bad from this point of view".⁶⁰ In a way de Gaulle was right, for the essence of Spears' new outlook had, through the Foreign Office, reached the Prime Minister at a crucial moment. Spears' position in the Levant was powerfully reinforced by Churchill's well-publicised statement.

Three days after this speech, Churchill and de Gaulle met at 10 Downing Street. The Prime Minister, after rebuking de Gaulle for leaving "a trail of Anglophobia behind him" repeated the well-worn formula that Britain had no ambitions in Syria except to win the war. In the next breath he added that Syria was a key factor in the Arab world, and that Britain could not "allow" any serious trouble to arise in the Levant. Later he reiterated that "the political situation in Syria must be so handled as to give the Arab world a real measure of satisfaction". De Gaulle, adjusting neatly to an atmosphere of inadequate avowals, denied any suspicion of selfish British motives in Syria and assured Churchill that the Free French would abide by their promises to the Arabs.⁶¹

Both in Parliament and his own office, the Prime Minister had given a fair account of British policy, which was anachronistic in its assumptions and contradictory in its aims. To support the aspirations of the Syrians and the privileged French position was

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a logical absurdity, for the clearest Syrian aspiration was to get rid of the French. The fatal flaw in Churchill's thinking was his inability to see beyond the analogy of Iraq, despite the recent events there. His idea of independence in the Middle East was expressed in the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1930, which was that a Mandatory had the right to expect military facilities and other privileges, in short a continuation of special influence, in the territory of the former Mandate. This odd definition of independence had passed muster in previous decades but had now had its day, and the French had lost their last opportunity to implement it in 1936. This only began to dawn on Churchill when the United States flatly refused to recognise any special privileges for France in the Levant, and he quite failed to see that the Syrians themselves were no longer prepared to accept the limited independence of an Iraq or an Egypt.

There was also a misleading ambiguity in the formula that Britain had no ambitions in Syria except to win the war. This was an honest assurance in so far as it meant that Britain did not intend to acquire the Levant and supplant France. But in Churchill's own wisecrack, the English never draw a line without blurring it,* and Britain certainly had oblique political ambitions in the Levant. He virtually admitted this to de Gaulle by speaking of what Britain would "allow" there. The blunt fact was that London hoped to restore some of its threadbare integrity in the Arab world by honouring its guarantee of Syrian independence. De Gaulle quickly spotted the suppressed premise in Churchill's inadequate formula, and observed that London "wanted to create the impression that, if the Syrians and Lebanese received independence, they would owe it to England".⁶² Giving satisfaction to the Arabs was certainly Britain's main aim, as Churchill repeatedly stressed to Lyttelton, though he failed to realise that this would cost France her whole position in the Levant. France would have relatively little interest in regional opinion once the tide had turned finally against the Axis in the Middle East. Britain, however, would still have an enormous concern for Arab opinion, and with Palestine yet

* House of Commons speech, 16 November 1948.

to be untangled, she would need all the goodwill she could get. Satisfying the wider Arab world was a purely British aim in the Levant, unblushingly imposed upon Free France.*

The platitudes of British policy in the Levant were unrealistic and self-contradictory: Syria was to be independent but the French must retain their military, economic and cultural facilities, which were anathema to the Syrians; France was to keep a special position in the Levant, but she must give the Syrians an independence which they would immediately use to evict France; and Britain had no imperial ambitions in the area, but then again she did, for she must preside over Franco-Syrian relations in such a way as to please Arab leaders throughout her own Muslim Empire!

Given this policy, so riddled with fallacies and shaky assumptions, the best diplomat in the world would have been doomed to fail. Not surprisingly, Churchill's policy statement suffered a fate similar to that of the Bible during the Reformation - every polemicist quoted those parts which most firmly supported his own view. Spears (often described as a latter-day Jesuit) led the field in expounding selected Churchillian proof-texts, and by mid-September he had collected a veritable arsenal of these. Churchill's latest statement had certainly reinforced Spears' position. Indeed, when at last he wrote a personal account of his Middle East mission, Spears put Churchill's September speech on the very first page. "I carried out the policy laid down by the Prime Minister to the best of my ability and understanding", he declared.⁶³

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In the Levant itself, the thorny question of independence talks between the Free French, the Syrians and the Lebanese was taking up a lot of time and energy. The process had begun with the customary Anglo-Free French squabble. Lyttelton, thinking that Britain's pledge to the Levantines was best guarded by having an observer at the negotiations, had requested Catroux to allow Spears to attend any conferences on independence. This produced nothing

* See Appendix E.

but a refusal and another Gaullist eruption about British meddling and violations of French sovereignty. Lyttelton had second thoughts, and decided that "the presence even of a British observer.... would inevitably lead to some responsibility being attached to us for the negotiations, which may fail or take an undesirable turn". This revised opinion had the added attraction of avoiding another confrontation with de Gaulle, who had just told Wright that "he hoped that [Cairo would] not press a request for the presence of a British representative which he could not admit". Lyttelton therefore proposed to tell de Gaulle that the matter would not be pressed. The Foreign Office concurred, noting that the Syrians and Lebanese "would undoubtedly attempt to enlist the support of the British observer whenever differences arose with the Free French", which would be a Bad Thing.⁶⁴ De Gaulle undoubtedly agreed, since Spears himself was to have been the observer.

All this, however, assumed that the Levantines were prepared to have serious talks with the Free French. When Hopkinson asked de Gaulle if he expected difficulties with the actual negotiations, the Free French leader had replied that the main difficulty was "to find the people with whom to negotiate".⁶⁵ Hopkinson soon saw the point. Within a month he was telling London that it was "unlikely that any Syrian politician wishes to negotiate a treaty with the Free French at the present time". He explained that the Syrians "cannot understand what de Gaulle represents", that they wanted to avoid commitments which might prevent them from getting a better deal later, and that the nationalist bloc which had negotiated in 1936 had now split up.⁶⁶

Spears put this more forcefully. Following the publication of the Lyttelton-de Gaulle letters, he reported that Syrian and Lebanese leaders now realised

that they must treat with the French, if anybody, and opportunist elements may now do so. But it has not increased their real desire for a treaty with the Free French. Many are convinced that the Germans will return at no distant date and [some have] decided to play for time... 67

In another report he added that some politicians were saying that the original Anglo-Free French proclamations could not bind them since they were not consulted and the proclamations themselves were based on shaky assumptions. Such people, Spears added, "do not consider the present time propitious for negotiations and there is reluctance to be tied to a 'movement' which has no status".⁶⁸

It was soon evident, however, that there were some local figures who were prepared to be more accommodating, and it was among these that Catroux was looking for likely candidates to head the new regimes. De Gaulle had hoped to see Hashim al-Atassi, who was closely associated with the abortive 1936 Treaty, appointed as the new President of Syria. On 4 September, however, Catroux wired that Atassi was clearly unsuitable and that he, Catroux, was "looking for a combination that would be more moderate in spirit" and representative of various regions within Syria. When de Gaulle repeated his preference for Atassi, Catroux replied on 14 September that "the recall of Atassi would have meant...the return of intransigent nationalism to power and the exclusion of us from the guidance of affairs". Catroux then advised that he was about to proclaim the independent republic of Syria, with the distinctly opportunist Sheikh Taj ad-Din al-Hasani as President. "The political question is carefully avoided in this text", Catroux added, and "there is the affirmation that only the conclusion of a treaty of friendship with Free France will confer a definitive character on Syrian independence".⁶⁹

Catroux was pleased with himself. He had coolly side-stepped the whole question of independence negotiations, for the moment at least, and he had backed his own greater experience of the Levant. Above all, he had kept Spears completely in the dark and presented the British with a *fait accompli*. Spears was considerably irked to have lost this early round of his long and stormy contest with Catroux. To add insult to injury, his complaints about the inadequate reference to economic arrangements, which Catroux deemed sufficient to satisfy the British that Syria would operate

within the sterling bloc, were dismissed. Catroux calmly indicated that he had already discussed this with Michael Wright in Damascus, to their mutual satisfaction.

Spears bitterly reported the whole affair to Cairo and London: how Catroux had papered over the nationalist fissure with some of the trappings of independence, such as a Ministry of Foreign Affairs and National Defence; how he had been denied any information about the nature of Catroux's dealings with the Syrians; how Catroux had undermined his argument for a postponement by using the fundamentally British line that postponements would reflect on Free French sincerity; and how he had been insufferably by-passed through Catroux's collaboration with Wright. Lyttelton's reply gave him no satisfaction: "Bride has been hurried to the altar with an indecent haste. It is true that the wedding has not been blessed...by your immediate presence, but nevertheless let us hope it will have been made in heaven". Given the hollow nature of the new Syrian regime, which was little more than an elaborate puppet show, it was a trivial analogy. There was no restoration of constitutional processes, no serious shift of powers to the Syrians, and Catroux remained High Commissioner in all but name.⁷⁰

After some minor last-minute adjustments, and an attempt by de Gaulle to delay the proclamation until some reference to the Mandate was included, Catroux published his manifesto of Syrian independence on 27 September 1941. It was in many ways a masterpiece of euphemism, and any specific reference to the continued juridical fact of the Mandate would have given this away completely. The proclamation was not short, à la Napoleon, but it was certainly obscure. Two months later Catroux finalised a parallel arrangement in the Lebanon whereby M. Alfred Naccache, a malleable and accommodating figure, became President of a government which was no more constitutional or independent than its Syrian counterpart. Nevertheless these governments were duly recognised by Britain.

The realities of the political situation were more apparent in a December message to the League of Nations, which gave formal notice that de Gaulle himself has assumed French mandatory responsibilities

in the Levant and advised that

He has invested General Catroux with the powers of High Commissioner for France in the Levant.... Catroux has proclaimed the independence of Syria and the Lebanon [but] this does not affect the legal position resulting from the Mandate, as this position can only be modified after the war.... Catroux continues to exercise the powers of High Commissioner... 71

This revealed what the Free French position had been all along. The difference between de Gaulle and Catroux over the Syrian proclamation was merely one of style, for the latter had carefully preserved the realities of French power beneath the lofty rhetoric of his manifesto. As de Gaulle told Eden on 19 September,

The Mandate could not be suppressed by a stroke of the pen.... The position of the French in Syria in this respect was exactly the same as [Britain's] in Iraq...it would be impossible to allow the control of foreign relations to pass exclusively into Syrian hands. 72

And on 1 October, the Free French leader had told Churchill and Lyttelton* that Catroux's declaration of Syrian independence "must, from the standpoint of international law, be regarded as provisional, since the Free French movement had no international status and no power to negotiate the termination of the mandate". Churchill, who clearly regarded "juridical considerations" as a nuisance factor, replied that the "ultimate fate of the territories would certainly be confirmed and completed".⁷³

Meanwhile Spears had been showing that he, too, was more concerned with the immediate fate of the Levant States. British recognition of Catroux's Syrian regime forced him to accept the creation of a similar pseudo-independence in the Lebanon, but throughout the autumn of 1941 his contempt for Free France had intensified, and he peppered London and Cairo with hostile reports. These catalogued the endless sins of the Free French, their utter unreliability as Allies, even their fifth-column tendencies, and strongly hinted that for military security and their own good they should be levered out of the Levant altogether. Even the trivial

* The Minister of State had come to London for a brief series of consultations.

and the bizarre became an occasion for Spears' philippics. One such wire reported that General Monclar (a noted wild man of the Foreign Legion) and a Free French Colonel had been "unwise enough to intervene" in one of the many street brawls between Australian and Free French troops, with the result that both officers were beaten up. After alleging that Monclar had laid about him with a lead-weighted stick before being felled, Spears proceeded to extrapolate wildly about Free French trouble-makers, conspirators and fifth-columnists.⁷⁴

Despite these verbal excesses, Spears succeeded in disturbing the Prime Minister. On 25 September Churchill told Eden to do something about it: "A series of disquieting telegrams, of which the attached is a specimen, are coming in from Syria. Now is the time, while the Minister of State is at home, to clear up these difficulties and have a plain policy". The attached was Spears' latest wire, of which Churchill had underlined the following:

we must be prepared to take an ever-increasing hand in the direction of affairs.... [British influence] is fought at every step with greater venom, one cannot help feeling, than either Vichy or the Germans would arouse.... Until we hold firmly the main levers of control we shall be building on shifting sand in Syria.

British control was necessary, Spears asserted, "if this country is to provide a safe basis for military operations in the future, or indeed if conditions are not to become chaotic". Eden accordingly convened a large inter-departmental meeting, which was swayed by Lyttelton's view: "The Minister of State [said] he was not convinced that the disquieting tone of recent telegrams from General Spears was altogether justified. He thought that the position in Syria was improving greatly".⁷⁵

This marked the beginning of a more critical appraisal on the part of the Foreign Office, but Churchill continued to give full weight to the bulletins emanating from his old comrade in Beirut. London had not yet grasped what had happened to Spears, or the extent of his bitterness towards the Gaullists. Nevertheless Spears' telegrams and messages throughout that autumn gave strong

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indications of his intensifying antagonism towards the Free French in the Levant. In September he asserted that Catroux wanted to establish some form of communication with Vichy, that the Free French were "a doubtful element in our midst", that de Gaulle had "dictatorial tendencies" and that to allow any Vichy-Free French liaison was to risk the subversion of the Levant. Free French forces were being poisoned against Britain, Spears claimed, in "the foetid moral atmosphere prevailing here amongst the French civilian population saturated as it is with opportunism, rotted by petty corruption". A few days later he enlarged on the subject of Catroux's overtures to Vichy, claiming that "we now have proof that Free French leaders are not above going a considerable way in undesirable negotiations without letting us know". It was apt, Spears concluded, "that the Free French adopted the double cross as their emblem".⁷⁶

In October, after clashes between the French and the tribal dissidents in the Jezireh, the region beyond the Euphrates, Spears called for the imposition of British martial law. In London, de Gaulle managed to avert this, despite strong evidence of provocative and brutal misrule in the Jezireh, and despite the strong representations made by Spears, who declared that

The French have been given every chance. They have failed with the Natives, they have failed to co-operate with us [and] this is too dangerous and too unsatisfactory to continue. The issues at stake are too important to give people who have failed... another chance. The French have not changed and do not intend changing...

Churchill was sympathetic, but Eden allowed himself to be persuaded by de Gaulle that "the situation was by now so far restored that measure proposed was in any case unnecessary", and the threat of British martial law faded away. Such effective interventions by de Gaulle in London brought a stinging rejoinder from Spears, who alleged that "the Free French Fuhrer carries all his points at home".⁷⁷

The cup of bitterness and repulsion overflowed in November as Spears beheld the Free French creation of another puppet regime in the Lebanon. His feelings poured out in a letter to Lyttelton on 25 November, which seemed to sum up all that had happened to him in 1941:

I am sure it is difficult for you, even in Cairo, to realise the horrible feeling engendered in those of us who have responsible positions here at seeing the Lebanon handed over more and more to the tender mercies of the Free French.

Spears now regarded the Free French not as Crusaders, but as unprincipled riff-raff: "the only white troops they have got [are] the Foreign Legion, all the others varying in hue from café-au-lait to the darkest café turc". Free France was a "farce", but what upset Spears most of all was his helplessness in the current political scene: "We are besieged by people who protest.... and yet we have to stand by and see it all happening, unable to do anything". It was now becoming a matter of personal integrity, he declared:

One feels as if we were holding down the Lebanon to be raped by Free France...I might add that this friendly service is only rewarded by a kick in the pants. I can think of no better definition of getting the worst of both worlds....

This, he claimed, was how the people of the Levant were coming to view the British role, and he found it "singularly unpleasant" to be "the embodiment of such a policy".⁷⁸

Spears' sympathies were entirely with the local people, and he saw it as a moral and personal imperative that he should champion their cause and resist the cynical Free French consolidation in the Levant. At the end of 1941 he was chafing under the restrictions of his position and his inability to prevent the creation of Catroux's puppet regimes. Yet these paper republics became the very means by which Spears came to exercise wider powers in the Levant. What had seemed a triumph for the Free French was at best a Pyrrhic victory, for Spears himself was chosen to be the British Minister to the new republics, in addition to retaining his old position as Anglo-Free French liaison chief in the Levant.

On 11 December he left Beirut and made the long journey to London, where he was to take a well-earned rest, to be knighted, and to arrange with the Foreign Office the details of his new appointment in the Levant. Despite his ill-health, Spears carried his Cause

straight into a meeting of the War Cabinet's Syrian Committee and gave a powerful tour de force on the whole situation in the Levant. He told the Committee that the "policy of supporting the Free French had never been understood by the local peoples.... they had been promised a change in the regime but in fact no change had, in their eyes, taken place". On the grounds that all Frenchmen in the Levant were despised, that their administration was bad, that security was endangered, and that the area was strategically vital, Spears called for a change of policy in the Levant. If the Syrians and Lebanese did not receive genuine British support for their independence, he warned, they would lose faith in the Allies and "serious disturbances" might break out. De Gaulle, he added, should be prevented from interfering.⁷⁹

It was a fitting conclusion to a year in which Spears' Quixotic vision of Free France had been dispelled by the shock of de Gaulle's Anglophobia and the visible adulteration of Free France in the Levant. The nominal transformation of the old administration into the Free French administration was probably necessary, but Spears had witnessed it with all the dismay of Orwell's animals peering through the farmhouse window at a shameful metamorphosis: he looked from Vichyist to Free Frenchman, from Free Frenchman to Vichyist, but he could no longer see the difference. His long affair with France expired amid the sordid pragmatics of the Levant. In its place had arisen the fledgling cause of the Syrians and Lebanese, who appealed to him to champion their freedom. Henceforth Britain's pledge to the Levant States, elevated into a sacred utterance, became his new mission. Spears returned in 1942 with extended powers and opportunities to make the Levant an asset to the Allies, to encourage the Syrians and Lebanese, and to relentlessly harry the French.

N O T E S

- 1 Spears Diary, 25-26 July 1941; Fulfilment, p.147.
- 2 de Gaulle, i.105.
- 3 Harvey Diary, 27 August, 1 October and 16 October, 1942.
- 4 Mary Borden, Journey Down a Blind Alley (1946), p.17. Mary Borden was the name under which the first Lady Spears wrote a number of novels, memoirs, etc. She also organised an Anglo-French field ambulance which became the subject of a bitter incident with de Gaulle in June 1945. (See Chapter 9).
- 5 Major-General Sir E.L. Spears, Assignment to Catastrophe, Vol.II: The Fall of France, June 1940 (1954), passim.
- 6 Churchill, ii.192.
- 7 de Gaulle, i.105.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Coghill papers: Notes on Wartime Jottings, p.15. Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Patrick Coghill was Head of the British Security Mission in the Levant from 1942 to 1945. Wilson made these remarks to Coghill in 1946, and rhetorically asked why such a sudden change had come over Spears.
10. Lampson Diary, 23-25 July, 1941.
- 11 Spears Diary, 23 July 1941.
- 12 Spears, Assignment, ii.65, 107.
- 13 Spears, Fulfilment, p.11f.
- 14 Parr tel., 26 July 1941, F0892/78.
- 15 Spears, Fulfilment, p.30.
- 16 Spears Diary, 20 June, 20-21 July, 1941.
- 17 Spears tel., 16 August 1941, SPRS IC/II.
- 18 Spears tel., 5 August 1941, SPRS IC/II.

- 19 Spears, Fulfilment, p.138.
- 20 Spears tel., 8 July 1941, SPRS IC/II.
- 21 Lyttelton tel., 19 July 1941, F0371/27302/E4110.
- 22 Lyttelton tel., 15 August 1941, PREM 3 422/14.
- 23 Spears tel., 16 August 1941, SPRS IC/II.
- 24 Spears Diary, summary of August 1941.
- 25 Spears, Fulfilment, p.142.
- 26 Spears, Assignment, ii.37.
- 27 Furlonge interview, 17 May 1978.
- 28 Slim, p.162.
- 29 Furlonge interview, 2 June 1978.
- 30 Furlonge paper, p.6f.
- 31 Furlonge interview, 17 May 1978.
- 32 Ibid. Spears was "susceptible to flattery", at which the Levantines excelled, and was "given an exaggerated idea of his own importance", according to Furlonge.
- 33 Spears Diary, 15 June 1941.
- 34 Lyttelton, p.257f.
- 35 Spears, Fulfilment, p.13f.
- 36 Spears Diary, 11-15 June 1941.
- 37 Spears tel., 12 September 1941, SPRS IB/K1.
- 38 Furlonge interview, 17 May 1978. Camille Chamoun was a member of the Lebanese Cabinet which denounced the mandate in 1943.
- 39 Spears tel., 17 July 1941, F0371/27300/E3920.
- 40 Spears tel., 27 July 1941, F0371/27304/E4333.
- 41 Spears Diary, 30 July 1941.
- 42 Lyttelton tel., 29 July 1941, F0371/27303/E4245.
- 43 Spears Diary, 2 August 1941; Auchinleck tel., 5 August 1941, F0371/27346/E4593.

- 44 Spears Diary, 2 August 1941.
- 45 Lyttelton, p.252.
- 46 Spears, Fulfilment, p.151.
- 47 War Office memorandum, 20 September 1941, PREM 3 305/6.
- 48 Lyttelton tel., 11 August 1941, SPRS IB/K7.
- 49 Lyttelton, p.252; Spears, Fulfilment, p.164.
- 50 Lyttelton, p.253f.
- 51 Lyttelton tel., 14 August 1941, SPRS IB/K7.
- 52 Lyttelton.tel., 28 August 1941, SPRS IB/K7.
- 53 Lyttelton tel., 15 August 1941, PREM 3 422/14.
- 54 de Gaulle tel., 12 August 1941, de Gaulle (Documents), i.213, italics mine. The reference to the Colonial Office reflects the fact that these activities were carried out by personnel from Palestine and Transjordan, responsible ultimately to the Colonial Office. The concerns of the Colonial Office were naturally focussed upon the Arab situation rather than on Anglo-French relations, and this emphasis - given the dilemma of reconciling these opposing interests - constantly attracted de Gaulle's suspicions of "the vast designs of Lawrence". It was not Colonial Office policy to evict France from the Levant, though some of its personnel on the spot clearly wished that it was. See, e.g. Glubb, "Note on Post-War Settlements in the Middle East" (61pp!), 15 November 1942, SPRS III/5.
- 55 Churchill tel., 2 August 1941, PREM 3 422/8.
- 56 de Gaulle tel., 7 August 1941, SPRS IB/K2; Churchill minute in PREM 3 422/8.
- 57 Lyttelton tel., 26 August 1941; Churchill tels., 27 and 28 August 1941: PREM 3 422/8.
- 58 Foreign Office memo, 1 September 1941, F0371/27308/E5332.
- 59 Foreign Office minutes, copy of Churchill's speech, F0371/27308/E5398.
- 60 de Gaulle tel., 11 September 1941, de Gaulle (Documents) i.302.
- 61 Record of a meeting at 10 Downing Street, 12 September 1941, SPRS II/4.
- 62 de Gaulle, i.184.
- 63 Spears, Fulfilment, p.1f.

- 64 Lyttelton tel., 17 August 1941, F0371/27306/E4724, and Sir H. Seymour minute attached.
- 65 Lyttelton tel., 1 August 1941, F0371/27303/E4320.
- 66 Hopkinson note, F0371/27307/E5307.
- 67 Spears tel., 21 August 1941, F0371/27307/E5309.
- 68 Spears tel., 19 August 1941, F0371/27307/E5054.
- 69 de Gaulle (Documents), i.301ff.
- 70 Spears tels., 12-16 August; Lyttelton tel., 16 August: SPRS IB/K1 and F0371/27309/E5638, E5727.
- 71 Text in Foreign Office tel., 5 December 1941, SPRS IB/K1.
- 72 Eden note, 19 September 1941, SPRS II/4.
- 73 Minutes of a meeting at 10 Downing Street, 1 October 1941: SPRS II/4 and PREM 3 422/9.
- 74 Spears tel., 25 September 1941, PREM 3 422/9.
- 75 Churchill minute, 25 September 1941; Spears tel., 23 September 1941; Eden minute 29 September 1941: F0371/27311/E6171. Foreign Office minutes, 26 September 1941, CAB 95/8.
- 76 Spears tels., 16 and 19 September 1941, SPRS IB/K7.
- 77 Spears tel., 7 October 1941; Eden tel., 28 October 1941; Lyttelton tel., 24 November 1941; PREM 3 422/14.
- 78 Spears letter, 25 November 1941, SPRS II/5.
- 79 Minutes of the War Cabinet Committee on Foreign (Allied) Resistance (Syria), 8th meeting, 19 December 1941, CAB 95/7.

For what is wedlock forcèd, but a hell,
 An age of discord and continual strife?
Henry VI (I) v.5.

Empire is a state of affairs even when the
 imperial power is not formally constituted
 as such.*

The period from the instalment of Catroux's client republics to February 1943 was marked by perpetual Anglo-Free French disputes and a swelling opposition to the disguised hegemony of the French. Local dissatisfaction (championed by Spears) and the disapproval of the wider Arab world exposed Catroux's regime to growing pressure, and the British soon realised that Arab nationalism would not be taken in by Catroux's version of independence. The Delegate-General was obliged to spend much of his time performing an inspired exercise in evasion and procrastination, but his efforts to deflect increasing pressure - much of it British - could not succeed indefinitely. By the spring of 1943 Catroux had played his last cards and was resigned to political gestures which were bound to weaken the Free French grip on the Levant. Despite varied and resourceful tactics on the part of Catroux and de Gaulle, their disguised version of the old mandatory regime failed to survive. The Free French blamed this failure largely upon General Spears, who tracked Catroux tenaciously and flushed him out of many concealments. And when de Gaulle made another dramatic appearance in the Levant, it was Spears who offered the most unflinching opposition to her versatile tactics.

At the beginning of 1942, Catroux was filled with misgivings at the very idea of Spears returning to the Levant with a wider brief. On 2 January, in conversation with Lyttelton, Catroux was informed of the possibility that Spears might be appointed British Minister to the new Syrian and Lebanese republics. Catroux replied

* George Lichtheim, Imperialism (1971), p.10.

that "he would be obliged to raise the greatest possible objection to the appointment of General Spears", on the grounds that

his presence in Syria had greatly accentuated the difficulties [between] the Free French and the British authorities. Moreover...Spears had occasionally acted...in a discourteous and threatening manner, and while this conduct had perhaps to be overlooked in the head of an ill-defined mission, it would be quite intolerable in an accredited British Minister. 1

These remarks, Catroux stressed, should not be repeated to anyone except Eden. Lyttelton accordingly sent them on to the Foreign Secretary, but if Catroux was hoping to pre-empt the Spears appointment, he was too late. In London the liaison mission had been handed over to Mr Charles Peake and absorbed into the Foreign Office, while Spears, who was taking sick leave, had accepted the dual role of British Minister to the Syrian and Lebanese Governments and Head of Anglo-Free French liaison in the Levant.

Informing Lyttelton of these changes, Eden stressed that Spears was "keen to return to the Middle East" and that, "after the valuable services Spears has rendered in Syria" there could be no question of cancelling the appointment in deference to Catroux's belated objections.² In any case, such objections had been brushed aside earlier by the need to give Spears some prominent post to compensate for his replacement in London. For Lyttelton himself had expressed some doubts about Spears' appointment. On 5 December he had told Eden that Spears

is generally much disliked by Free French. He also makes mountainous protests about molehill incidents and this irritates Catroux. Part of this is indicative of his bad health. As a result the Free French do not co-operate as frankly with us as they otherwise might. If, therefore, Spears shows any disinclination to accept the post and if you can find him another good job I should recommend that he should not be pressed to remain. I repeat that if he accepts the post I can work with him... 3 *

This warning, from a man who had frequently commended Spears' services in the Levant, was not taken too seriously by Eden. Spears' old image as a Francophile still lingered, Free French susceptibilities were

* This is wrongly ascribed to Lampson in Woodward, Foreign Policy, iv.221.

becoming tedious, and any odd behaviour could be put down to Spears' ill-health. Above all, Spears had to be given an important job if he was to be quietly detached from his liaison mission in London, and with Churchill looking on in the interests of his old comrade, Eden had to offer Spears something big. Under these circumstances, a few rows with Catroux were not allowed to upset the deal arranged by Eden and Churchill. Spears was duly knighted, given his handsome appointment in the Levant, and granted generous leave in England.

The new appointee was eagerly anticipating his return, and was alert to the possibilities of his dualist role. "We will have a lot of fun when I get back", he told Hamilton, his Arabist friend in Beirut. "It certainly is the oddest diplomatic hand that has ever been played".⁴ If he hinted at his intentions to a friend, he made them even plainer to the foe. During a dinner given by de Gaulle in March, Spears asked point-blank why Catroux was not giving any real measure of independence to the Republics in accordance with his promises. The exasperated de Gaulle replied that this was purely his concern, but Spears retorted that Britain had guaranteed Free French promises and could not ignore the serious repercussions in the Arab world which would follow such a breach of promise. When de Gaulle reiterated his own views, Spears declared that

in that case there were likely to be quite serious difficulties in the Levant, as I happened to be accredited to two independent Republics and not to puppet Governments existing on General Catroux's and General de Gaulle's favour.

This astonishing outburst, at the sort of gathering where Spears was noted for his charm and wit, was a declaration of private war.⁵

The British Minister had got off to an ominous start before he had even presented his credentials in Beirut and Damascus. His appointment had been strongly contested by Catroux, with whom he would have to consult constantly, and he had left de Gaulle in no doubt that he would press the Syrian and Lebanese cause to the

embarrassment of Free French formalities. De Gaulle and Catroux inevitably drew some dark conclusions from the fact that such a man had been appointed to represent Britain in the Levant.

These impressions were deepened by Spears' first moves in the Levant itself. Within a few days of his return he had presented himself formally to the Lebanese and Syrian Presidents, but pointedly failed to pay Catroux the sort of official visit which the Delegate-General had a right to expect as the representative of the French Mandate. The message was clear - Spears no longer recognised the mandate. It was not simply an oversight, for Spears had used a similar tactic when he refused to attend Catroux's ceremonies of Lebanese independence in November 1941. He had now hit upon a more effective move, which was to take this pseudo-independence literally and thereby dismiss the French mandate as a dead letter. Catroux could not openly deny Spears' premise - that independence was genuine - but he had somehow to refute his conclusion. This could only be done by saying that the mandate still existed as a juridical fact, which was of course awkward, for it raised suspicions and doubts about the worth of Catroux's independence decrees. Nevertheless Spears' tactical literalism soon forced the Free French to stress the continued validity of the mandate.

In the Levant, Catroux angrily proposed to ignore Spears until his own position had been recognised, while in London de Gaulle complained to Eden about the snub. The battle was joined, and Britain's first requirement in the Levant - tranquillity - was thus denied from the outset.⁶ Spears kept up the pressure in his first discussions with Catroux in April. Stressing that Britain hoped to see an extension of the independence she had guaranteed, he asked Catroux to refrain in future from invoking the mandate, since it was "legal fiction" now that independence was granted! Full collaboration with Britain, he breezily asserted, was the only way Catroux could continue to maintain French prestige now.⁷

This condescending advice did not impress Catroux any more than a wilder statement which Spears apparently made, though he left it out of his own report. This was that the Free French were

isolated and out of favour in London, where their usefulness as Allies was no longer accepted, and their influence on metropolitan France was regarded as negligible; as for de Gaulle, he was surely a disappointed man who would soon abandon his failing enterprise. This mischievous blend of half-truths did not shake Catroux, who saw it as an attempt to hustle him into submissive collaboration.⁸

Although the Foreign Office made disapproving noises when this conversation was reported, it still treated Spears' first general report on the Levant with great concern. This report depicted a disgruntled population alienated by Catroux's puppet regime, and it claimed that French prestige was being maintained at the expense of the war effort. Spears therefore urged that elections for a more representative government should be promised by a definite date, and that Catroux should be compelled to act in a more Allied spirit.⁹

The Foreign Office accordingly asked Spears, Monckton* and Auchinleck whether immediate changes ought to be made in the Levant administrations. Spears promptly replied that an interim government of bureaucrats should be installed at once, pending elections which should be promised by a definite date. He was supported by the Middle East War Council[†] which recommended that an election date (no later than December 1942) should be announced soon.¹⁰ From this point on, both London and Cairo began to press the reluctant Free French to announce and hold general elections in the Levant States, and meanwhile to make some immediate and substantial administrative changes.

These opening moves were indicative of all that was to follow until February 1943, when the elections were finally announced. Throughout this period, Anglo-Free French affairs were marked by

* Sir Walter Monckton, Acting Minister of State from 26 February 1942 (when Lyttelton left to become Minister of Production) until the arrival of the new Minister, R.G. Casey, on 4 May, 1942. Casey, formerly Australia's Minister in Washington, was the subject of heated exchanges between Churchill and the Australian Prime Minister, John Curtin, who saw links with America as more important than notions of the Empire. See PREM 3 305/2.

† This consisted of the Minister of State, the Commander-in-Chief, Lampson, MacMichael and several others including Spears.

perpetual rivalry, squabbling and nasty incidents on a local, day-to-day level, and by a series of clashes and crises on the highest levels. Of these, the Spears-Catroux struggle was only the most durable and visible. This context prejudiced virtually every Anglo-Free French concern in the Levant, with the sole exception of the wheat scheme. This was a co-operative success and a positive contribution to the war effort. Spears himself recalled that in this instance "I had the pleasant experience, which lost nothing because of its novelty, of working in great harmony with Catroux".¹¹

Originally, the wheat scheme was neither a success nor a case of satisfactory Anglo-Free French teamwork. It began in the autumn of 1941, when Spears and Lyttelton became concerned at the possibility of serious food shortages in the Levant. Crops had been poor, and the hoarders and speculators were at their old, ruthless game. Lyttelton decided to take them on, Having obtained 80,000 tons of wheat, he released this without warning, below black market prices. The idea was to force a sudden drop in the price of grain, which would compel the hoarders to release their stocks lest they be by-passed completely. This measure had worked elsewhere, Lyttelton assured Spears - but it failed utterly. The Minister of State had under-rated the Syrian merchants and reckoned without the vast gap between rich and poor in the Levant. The speculators simply bought up to 80,000 tons, added it to their stocks and carried on. As one eye-witness observed, the Levant was "a profiteer's paradise and a poor man's purgatory".¹²

This was the situation which Spears inherited on his return to the Levant. Lyttelton had gone, and now that the wheat scheme had failed the French - who had originally been associated with it - were calling it a purely British affair. Spears returned to find that the wheat scheme had been maliciously dubbed le Plan Spears. This was, ironically, to give him enormous prestige in the Levant, for he turned the initial disaster into a resounding success by producing an alternative Spears Plan for the 1942 crop. His basic idea was to collect the wheat directly from the growers in return for cash. By securing the co-operation of the Syrian and Lebanese Ministers, many of whom were big feudal landlords, Spears largely overcame the age-

old Levantine ability to hide the harvest from conquerors and occupying powers. In gaining this local co-operation, Spears had to use all his resources to persuade the Syrians and Lebanese that Free French participation would not mean a return to the old, brutal methods of requisitioning. He had to work just as hard to prevent Catroux from releasing his savage Gardes Mobiles among the villages where grain was not forthcoming. The last thing that Spears wanted was a series of local uprisings at a time when British forces had their hands full with Rommel, and he called in Casey, Auchinleck and Wilson to reinforce the arguments he was putting to Catroux.

The problem was aggravated by Catroux's sensitivity to the question of Free French prestige in the Levant. This, he argued, would be damaged if the British were put on an equal footing with the French in a purely internal matter. Catroux repeated this view to Casey during a conference in Cairo on 11 May, but was bluntly told that the wheat scheme was not a private Free French concern but an issue which gravely affected the entire Middle Eastern war effort. Spears himself was fond of stressing that the wheat gathered in Syria should be measured against the lives of British sailors who might have to deliver foreign grain to the Levant. Now Catroux heard it from the Minister of State, who added that Free French amour-propre could surely not be advanced as a reason for impeding the war effort, and if it was, the British would be forced to set up the wheat authority without the Free French.

Then Auchinleck joined in, demanding to know whether Catroux had some higher priority than winning the war, and stating that any failure by the civilian authorities to feed the population of the Levant would simply force the British Army to do the job in the interests of maintaining order. When Wilson added that he had already ascertained that his army could do the job, Catroux gave up the uneven struggle. He was in any case "fairly keen on the war effort", according to Furlonge, and the views expressed in Cairo

undoubtedly helped him to reconcile himself to an Anglo-Free French wheat scheme in the Levant States.

The Wheat Office, or O.C.P. (Office des Céréales Panifiables), was duly established in May 1942, with representatives from Syria, Lebanon, Free France and Britain, whose decisions were subject to the discretion of Spears and Catroux. As a sop to Gaullist susceptibilities, final decisions were to be published as decrees emanating from the Delegate-General of Free France in the Levant. After another crisis with the Syrian Cabinet, which Spears only averted by assuring the Syrians that British officers would be present throughout the countryside at every stage of the scheme, the O.C.P. was officially launched on 23 May.

By this new "Spears Plan", the total tonnage to be collected from each region was estimated, an official price was fixed, and the wheat was collected by O.C.P. personnel at the threshing floors in return for direct cash payments. There were of course great difficulties over corruption in high places, and one unlicensed wheat lorry was even found to be consigned to Madame Catroux! The smuggling of wheat across the Turkish border and the operation of a black market could not be entirely stopped. Nor could the bribery of local officials. Nevertheless Spears, who seemed to revel in this battle of wits, had a few tricks up his own sleeve. "To make the O.C.P. work", wrote Coghill*, "a man had to be ruthless, unscrupulous and able to turn a Jesuitical blind eye on scandalous means that could...justify the end. Spears... seemed to have all these qualities".

Spears needed such resources by the end of July, when a serious shortage of bank notes deprived the O.C.P. of its chief attraction to the peasant-farmers - cash payments on the spot. While Spears attempted to satisfy the rural population with hastily-printed bank promissory notes, the Syrian politicians - mostly great landowners or merchants who made enormous profits under the

*Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Patrick Coghill, Head of the British Security Mission in the Levant States, 1942-1945.

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old system - began to show signs of withdrawing their support from the O.C.P. This development was followed by an attempt on the part of Catroux, who suddenly confronted Spears with a host of Free French officials, to resort to a massive show of force and terrorise the villagers and growers into producing their hidden harvests.

In this crisis, Spears showed great determination and wit. He reduced the target figure for Syria, and then insisted that a supreme effort must be made to reach this figure. Having borrowed an inhospitable Red Sea island called Kamaran, he warned that offenders would henceforth be deported without exception. Once this message had been delivered to all the big landlords and merchants, Spears went to the Syrian Prime Minister, a noted landowner, and announced that despite the man's exalted office he would be the first to inhabit Kamaran if the quotas for his own region were not met. The following day, Spears added, he and Catroux would accompany the Syrian on a tour of his lands and villages, to see if the wheat was coming in. The result was almost miraculous. Grain poured in faster than the O.C.P. could sack it, while the Prime Minister went on the pressurise his fellow-culprits in Syria to good effect. His efforts were enhanced by the well-publicised spectacle of a group of affluent hoarders being banished to Kamaran.

These moves effectively ended the crisis, and by September it was obvious that the O.C.P. had been a distinct success. In contrast to 1941, not a single ton of wheat was imported into the Levant. This meant one less task for the hard-pressed Allied shipping, and it also generated the refreshing anomalies of agrarian justice and Anglo-Free French co-operation in the Levant. This was very largely a personal success for Spears, who had overcome a series of obstacles in the establishment and implementation of the O.C.P. scheme. "It was his tireless energy and drive", Coghill recalled, "[which] made the O.C.P. work". This achievement was recognised by his Middle East colleagues and by Churchill himself, but the Foreign Office showed little interest in Spears' wheat scheme.* This was

* Spears makes this claim in his memoirs, and the files of the Foreign Office bear it out.

short-sighted, for Spears had not just helped the war effort - he had prevented any serious food shortages, and past events had shown that this was the most fundamental cause of disorder in the Levant. If at a later stage the Foreign Office blamed Spears for disorders of a political nature, it should also have recognised that Spears effectively ruled out any serious civil disturbances at a time when the British were in desperate trouble with Rommel in Egypt, and could ill-afford any more serious difficulties in the Arab world.¹³

There were, however, some aspects of the Anglo-Free French wheat scheme which were less fortunate. In his memoirs Spears condemns Catroux, who "could only assess events as factors in an imaginary Anglo-French power struggle", for persistently treating the whole project as a blow to Free French prestige. Yet this was not all imagination on Catroux's part. The following extract from Spears' diary indicates that the Frenchman's fears were well-founded:

Catroux came to see me at my house.... The atmosphere was very cordial, and I have a feeling that for the time being at least I have got the French where I wanted them, i.e., that I am being consulted on equal terms on all important matters concerning these countries.... All this is entirely due to the one great show-down over the Wheat question. Catroux has realised that he cannot govern the country without me, and having realised this has become amenable... 14

Behind the facade of co-operation, behind all the protestations that nothing mattered half as much as the Allied war effort, there was clearly a contest, a rivalry and a question of comparative prestige in the eyes of the local peoples.¹⁵

* * * * *

Despite his misgivings about increased British involvement in the affairs of the Levant, Catroux had given his general support to the Anglo-French O.C.P. for practical reasons - the need to cope with food shortages and to make some contribution to the Allied

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war effort at a time when resources were thinly spread. No such considerations, however, swayed the Frenchman in other areas, and he continued to resist British encroachments on his domain. In particular he reacted sharply to Spears' demand to be consulted on equal terms in all important matters. On the subject of elections, Catroux's resistance took on a more subtle character. Realising that London now supported this idea, Catroux was too clever to put up any outright opposition to general elections. He fell back upon a series of delaying tactics and red herrings, and at first the wheat scheme itself and Rommel's alarming drive into Egypt offered him useful arguments for postponing any announcement of elections in the Levant States.*

The French had nothing to gain and much to lose if any open elections were held in the Levant, for they had long since alienated most of the populace to an extent which no sudden fit of liberalism could repair. Nevertheless Catroux had to do something about the woebegone image of his so-called republics, which had, as he admitted to de Gaulle, "disappointed public opinion". At the end of April the Delegate-General informed de Gaulle that he intended to restore the "constitutional machinery" which had been suspended when France declared war in 1939. This simply meant re-opening national assemblies which were little more than debating clubs. "I do not", Catroux added, "want to proceed to elections as desired by Spears". De Gaulle endorsed Catroux's proposal. "Naturally", he agreed, "elections cannot be imagined in the present strategic situation".¹⁶

These modest plans were immediately disrupted by the British belief that elections were necessary. At the end of April the Foreign Office had endorsed the Middle East War Council's call for elections to be held before the end of 1942, and for more immediate economic and administrative improvements. On 4 May the new Minister of State, Casey, had arrived in Cairo, and within a week he was holding talks with Catroux, Spears, Auchinleck and

* In January 1942 Rommel had driven the British two-thirds of the way across Cyrenaica. On 26 May he attacked again, and advanced 350 miles across . . . Cyrenaica and Egypt. By 30 June he was a mere 60 miles from Alexandria, at Alamein.

Wilson. In these decisive talks, Catroux not only agreed to cooperate in the wheat scheme, but also conceded the principle that elections should be held before the end of 1942, subject to the approval of General de Gaulle. In explaining this volte-face to his chief, Catroux reported that Casey and his colleagues had been adamant that elections must be announced in the near future for the sake of order and security in the Middle East, as Egypt and Iraq had refused to recognise the current regime in the Levant, and Axis propaganda was exploiting this dissent. He had therefore seen that such an announcement could not be avoided "without damage", and had provisionally conceded in the name of Allied solidarity. De Gaulle and his London colleagues, who were aware that the American press had announced the Catroux-Casey agreement as definite, decided (for the time being) to agree to elections late in 1942. Nevertheless de Gaulle insisted that they should be announced "as late as possible", and in the name of France alone. This left the Free French a certain latitude which de Gaulle and Catroux were able to exploit.¹⁷

On 8 June, during a visit to Free French troops under Auchinleck's command, Catroux informed Casey of de Gaulle's stipulations. When Casey repeated his request for an early announcement concerning elections, Catroux suggested that Eden should approach de Gaulle himself with this request, which effectively shelved the matter for another fortnight.¹⁸ When the Minister of State returned to the question on 23 June, his own position had been somewhat eroded by Rommel. As he told London :

Catroux said that the problem was now further complicated by recent developments in the Western Desert which had caused nervousness in the Levant... Once the announcement of elections was made, the country would enter into an electoral period and the position of the Governments would become still more difficult. [Therefore] the announcement should be delayed until the military situation had become more clear.

Casey thought that there was "considerable force" in this argument,

and reached a provisional agreement with Catroux that, provided the German threat had been met, and the grain supply secured through the wheat scheme, elections would be announced at the beginning of August, at which time the governments would be reconstructed, and the actual voting would take place in mid-September.

All this, Catroux insisted, could not be finalised without de Gaulle's agreement. And when Casey, in his profound ignorance of Levantine politics and society, stressed that the elections must be patently fair, Catroux's response was interesting. "He agreed", reported Casey, "but pointed out that the course of the elections would have to be guided so as to ensure that pro-Ally Governments were returned".¹⁹

In Beirut, Spears was annoyed and offended to learn of these "more or less final decisions" being made without his participation, and complained about Catroux going over his head. He also feared that the inexperienced Casey had allowed Catroux a free hand to "guide" the elections along Free French lines:

This is Catroux's way of saying that he intends to rig the elections so as to ensure a Government of Free French puppets, and I think it a pity that this statement of his was apparently not challenged.

Spears was not the man to let this sort of thing pass, and he tackled Catroux with his customary vigour, stressing that "Elections rigged by the French" were totally unacceptable.

In Cairo, it was Hopkinson's turn to be surprised, since Spears' complaints had been addressed to him. "I don't believe for a moment that Catroux intends to fake the elections", he minuted. "I shall be interested to hear the result of General Spears' conversation with General Catroux. I hope and trust he was not provocative".²⁰ This hope, like Hopkinson's touching faith in Catroux's political purity, proved to be vain. Spears had spoken to Catroux like a Victorian schoolmaster, and the polished Frenchman - who already had to endure the supervision of his formidable wife - was tired of Spears' tactless tutelage.

Catroux's simmering exasperation came to the boil in their next confrontation. In July, protests against the shortage and high price of bread had precipitated a crisis in the Lebanese Cabinet, and Catroux settled this by making some Ministerial changes and appointing a new Prime Minister. As Catroux made these adjustments, Spears awoke to the fact that he was not, after all, being consulted as an equal in all Levantine affairs. Reacting hastily, Spears conveyed a blustering message to Catroux, but the effect was not what had been anticipated. . Catroux sent him a stinging letter of rebuke, a copy of which went to Casey along with Catroux's formal complaint that

to the Levant and to the enemy, the British Minister is now the man who has assigned himself the task of destroying French influence in Syria and the Lebanon...

It is clear that this belief would not have taken root or spread if General Spears, restricting himself to his proper role and respecting the agreements, had abstained from interfering in political and administrative affairs and had shown more restraint in expressing his opinion and his ideas.

Spears claimed that his verbal message had been distorted by Boegner, Catroux's political aide, and cited the wheat scheme as proof of his desire to assist and co-operate with Catroux. This failed to mollify the Frenchman. He repeated that Spears' "intimidation" was intolerable and refused to have any further dealings with him.²¹

Casey did what he could to pour oil on these troubled waters. After a series of meeting with Catroux and Spears in Cairo, in which both men made conciliatory noises, Casey gave Catroux a letter stating that

General Spears has given me a categorical assurance that he has in no way set himself the task of destroying French influence in Syria and the Lebanon and obstructing your activities....

[He] fully recognises the special position and rights which you enjoy as Délégué Général... 22

In return for this satisfaction, however, Catroux found that he had at best won a Pyrrhic victory, since he had to assure Casey

that once the predominant political position of the representative of France was acknowledged he admitted fully the right of H.M. Government to interest themselves in the affairs of the Levant in the conditions arising out of the war and to be kept fully informed.

Catroux found himself being questioned closely on the meaning of this assurance, and all the contradictions of the Anglo-Free French presence in the Levant emerged in the subsequent discussion.

Catroux left Cairo with a written assurance that his position and prerogatives were respected, and that Spears had no desire to obstruct or threaten him. Yet he had been obliged to concede that "Spears was accredited to the two States and...has the right to intervene [sic] in all matters affecting British interests". He had also conceded that the formation of the Lebanese Cabinet was a case in point, that it might be necessary to take up with him the suitability of the appointees, and that in future Spears ought to be informed in advance. All this implied that, apart from his overbearing manner, Spears had been right all along. The possible military repercussions of virtually anything that Catroux did as Delegate-General clearly made nonsense of his "special position" except for ceremonial purposes. The same considerations also gave Spears a sweeping justification for including all prominent Levantine affairs in his bailiwick.²³

On 5 August the Minister of State addressed himself once more to the well-worn subject of elections. Reminding Catroux of their agreement of 24 June, Casey declared that "the time has now come for action", and called on Catroux to make the election announcements in the Levant forthwith.²⁴ Casey was never to see a reply to this wire, but three days later, when de Gaulle arrived in Cairo, the British Minister received a reply of a different sort altogether,

General de Gaulle had been watching developments in the Levant with an increasing displeasure. The O.C.P., the election issue and the activities of Spears were all, in his view, a flagrant violation of French sovereignty and a concerted effort to undermine the French position in the Levant. He said as much to Eden on 28 July, and declared that he could no longer delay his planned visit to Free French territories, which he had twice postponed. The next day de

Gaulle called on Churchill and stated that he was anxious to get to the Levant where, he said, Spears was making trouble for the Free French. Churchill promptly replied that while Spears had many enemies, he had one friend - the Prime Minister. He added that the independence of the Levant States was said to be a sham, and the populace discontent. De Gaulle retorted that they were at least as satisfied as the people of Iraq, Palestine or Egypt. On this note the Frenchman set off for the Middle East. There was "no reason", he remarked, "why we should let ourselves be despoiled in silence".²⁵

He made this attitude painfully clear when he arrived in Cairo on 8 August. Once more he strode into the Minister of State's office, but this time it was Casey who received the first broadside:

General de Gaulle...came to see me, uncompromising and intransigent. There was a frightful row. He accused us of trying to oust the French from their position in Syria and the Lebanon.... The discussion degenerated into an undignified shouting match, he in French and I in English.

The shouting began when Casey seized the opportunity to tackle de Gaulle about the need to announce the elections in the Levant States. De Gaulle bluntly retorted that "there will be no elections this year in Syria or in the Lebanon" and launched into a diatribe about British interference. Rejecting the whole argument about effects on the war effort, de Gaulle declared that Britain had no legitimate role in the internal affairs of the Levant and should mind its own business.

This time, however, de Gaulle found Cairo's response tougher, thanks to the presence of Churchill himself, who was currently sacking Auchinleck. After consulting Churchill, Casey sent for Catroux and told him that de Gaulle's attitude was completely unacceptable, that the elections must be held, and that Churchill himself would intervene if necessary. Catroux quickly assured Casey that de Gaulle was not seeking a quarrel, and thereafter Casey received an indirect apology from de Gaulle. It was soon clear, however, that de Gaulle was not at all apologetic about the election issue.²⁶

On 12 August the Free French leader set off on something like a royal progress through the Levant States, treating the local notables with great pomp and ceremony. He studiously ignored most British

personnel and openly insulted several Spears Mission officers in the provincial centres. As Coghill observed, de Gaulle

ran true to form and in all his speeches and behaviour mentioned only France, not one reference to the Allies - made the most unfortunate references to France's "historical" interest in Syria, the mandate, and immature or premature independence... 27

De Gaulle's speeches cleverly embellished and exaggerated French status in the Levant. In Beirut, for instance, he told a Franco-Lebanese audience that independence was an accomplished fact, and that the necessary treaties of friendship and security were "tacitly signed" by the relationship already achieved between Free France and the new republics. In the present war conditions, of course, it was not "just or possible to have recourse to free popular consultations". The day would come for that, and France was eager to see it dawn, but the time was not yet ripe. Meanwhile, although enemy propaganda and certain fumlbers in "the democratic camp" sometimes created difficulties, Free France* would not allow her position to be undermined and encroached upon. Spears, who attended this speech by invitation, did not miss the oblique reference to his own activities.²⁸

De Gaulle's impressive appearances throughout the Levant were only the visible side of a two-pronged move to restore the situation for Free France and to throw the British hounds completely off the scent. Behind the scenes, he set to work to divide his critics and exploit the differences and distances between the various British authorities. Constant practice had made de Gaulle something of an expert at playing off one British Minister or Department against another. Now, by seeing many individuals and adopting a variety of attitudes, he inspired a bewildering shower of signals between London, Cairo and Beirut, and created enough confusion among the British to win Free France a breathing-space in the Levant.

* From July 1942 de Gaulle's movement was officially designated "Fighting France" (*La France Combattante*), a term which occurs in some of the documents quoted hereafter. Others, however, continue to refer to "Free France" in the period after July 1942. For the sake of convenience, I do likewise.

This game began straight after de Gaulle's confrontation with Casey. Singling out the sympathetic Michael Wright, the Frenchman adopted his most disarming manner. "Well, here we are back in the unfortunate atmosphere of last summer", he sighed, adding that these disputes detracted from the Allied war effort. De Gaulle suggested that there were really only two difficulties in Syria - the election issue and the behaviour of Spears. After apologising for his outburst in Casey's presence, de Gaulle explained that his zeal to safeguard French territories sprang from his anxiety to keep French opinion sympathetic, and thus ensure support for the Allies if a second front opened in Europe. Nevertheless, he assured Wright, his intentions in the Levant were honourable. While these States were too immature to run themselves in wartime, France would soon grant them "the same full measure of independence [which Britain had] given to Egypt and Iraq". This was shrewd, especially as the conversation was reported to Churchill, who still thought that Iraq was an adequate model for Middle Eastern independence.²⁹ In the Levant, however, men like Furlonge and Spears knew that the Syrians and Lebanese would never sign such a treaty.

Next on de Gaulle's list of impressionables was Mr. Gwynn, the acting United States Consul-General in Beirut. Here the Frenchman really let himself go, raising the possibility of a complete rupture between Free France and Britain. On this occasion he claimed that "the time had not yet come" for independence in the Levant "and might not come for many years". Meanwhile, however, the British seemed bent on eliminating France from the Eastern Mediterranean. There would have to be a rapid and fundamental change in British policy, and

the British representative, General Spears, would have to go, although he anticipated and feared strong opposition by the British Prime Minister in that regard. Should the Prime Minister refuse to acquiesce it would mean the end of all collaboration.

Gwynn said that this seemed unthinkable, but de Gaulle "affirmed his determination to see the matter through". De Gaulle was aware that Washington's State Department regarded Spears as the nigger in the Syrian woodpile, and his performance had the desired effect. Gwynn's

alarming report duly landed on Eden's desk, via Washington.³⁰ It certainly intensified Foreign Office displeasure with its misfit man in Beirut: "Spears is busy bedevilling our relations with De Gaulle and the Syrians", fumed Eden's Secretary. "However, I think Spears is rapidly hanging himself with his quarrels which now extend to... the Americans, who have complained about him".³¹

In Cairo, Gwynn's report was linked with another conversation about Spears. This time de Gaulle had invited General Holmes* to have a friendly chat about the problems of the Levant. Again, it was a shrewd choice. Holmes had seen something of the Free French at their best, when they defied Rommel at Bir Hakeim. He knew nothing of their less admirable pursuits in the Levant, he had clashed with Spears over liaison issues, and he personally disliked Spears.³² In a "perfectly calm and collected" style, de Gaulle explained his whole position to Holmes, claiming that he had just asked Churchill to remove Spears, and insisting that he would not leave Beirut until Spears went. De Gaulle had not put any such specific demand to Churchill, but his statement evoked a sympathetic reponse from Holmes, who reported that

I am...not alone in my considered opinion that Spears should go as soon as possible in the interests of military security. Every Politico-Military problem put forward to the French through Spears is doomed from the start.

His removal might be considered in some quarters as hauling down the flag but...it is a necessary step towards proper collaboration between Allies.

The alternative appears to be a complete rupture with the French with consequences which...cannot be foreseen involving the possible use of force...

This report was immediately passed on to Casey's office by the new Commander-in-Chief, Alexander. There, despite the remark that Holmes was new to the complexities of the Levant, his report strengthened the feeling among Casey's subordinates that Spears might indeed have to go - but not too suddenly, lest de Gaulle

* Lieutenant-General W.G. Holmes, the 9th Army Commander, previously commanded Auchinleck's 10th Corps at Mersa Matruh. During Rommel's audacious June offensive, Holmes' two infantry divisions were stranded by the disorderly retreat of Gott's 13th Corps. Two-thirds of Holmes' troops managed to break out at night, but Holmes himself was dismissed in the subsequent shake-up and sent to the backwater of 9th Army. There Furlonge found him understandably bitter about his dismissal and bored by the humdrum existence of 9th Army.

should conclude that his ultimatum had achieved this result. In any case, it was thought that Catroux would also have to go if a new start was to be made in Anglo-Free French affairs in the Levant. For a time, however, nothing more was done about these suggestions.³³

De Gaulle's final attempt to enlist Anglo-Saxon supporters was something of a flop. Early in September there breezed into Beirut the American tourist par excellence - Mr. Wendell Willkie, Roosevelt's Republican opponent, whom the President had sent on a global fact-finding mission. Willkie's style astonished both Spears and de Gaulle. "Tell me what is the difficulty between the French and the British here", he asked one local expert. "I can give you fifteen minutes".³⁴ Spears was obliged to summarise the whole situation over lunch, but de Gaulle had more time to put his case, and argued that "the English found the greatest difficulty in keeping their local policies in line with their general policy". This time, however, de Gaulle's hospitality backfired. Willkie's reaction to the Napoleonic décor of the High Commissioner's office was to suggest, back in America, that de Gaulle was aping Louis XIV! Willkie dismissed the whole Levant problem as one more quarrel between "two equally detestable colonial systems".³⁵

Meanwhile on 23 August Spears had taken a leaf out of de Gaulle's book and used the personal approach to strengthen his own hand. Hearing that Churchill had returned to Cairo from Moscow, Spears flew down to see his old comrade and received a warm welcome. "Louis Spears has a great many enemies, but he has one friend", Churchill boomed, looking around the luncheon table at Casey, Cadogan and others. After lunch, Spears had a private talk with Churchill, who heaped praise, advice and encouragement upon his old friend, along with a warning that some people in London were gunning for him. Churchill, annoyed by a wire he had received from de Gaulle (see below), warmly commended Spears for "keeping up British prestige in the Levant". But to keep the Foreign Office quiet, he suggested, Spears should be less zealous, à la Talleyrand, and should reduce the length and number of his reports.

At this point, Cadogan was called in and Churchill proudly told the Foreign Office mandarin all about Spears' splendid wheat

scheme which had saved so much Allied shipping. On the vexed question of elections in the Levant, Churchill first conceded the Gaullist point that "with the Germans so near" it was not a good time for an election campaign. However, he agreed with Spears that there was no harm in announcing that elections were to be held - which was what Casey had originally agreed with Catroux. When Churchill had gone, Spears had a further talk with Cadogan, who seemed to have "little knowledge or interest" in the Middle East. Forgetting Churchill's fresh advice, Spears told Cadogan that he felt a certain pressure to report matters in such a way as to please London, which was obviously folly and which he would never do. The uncomfortable Cadogan murmured his assent.³⁶

By the end of August de Gaulle's volatile presence in the Levant was becoming an issue in itself, and leading to a top-level row in which he almost broke with Churchill's Government. In a series of exchanges between de Gaulle on one side and Churchill and Casey on the other, matters rapidly escalated until there was nothing for it but to review the entire Anglo-Free French situation at the highest level in London. In all this brinkmanship, few besides Spears noticed that the undertakings given by Catroux in the Levant, which were already overdue, were quietly shelved until the Allies' family feud was over and the broken crockery replaced.³⁷

On 14 August de Gaulle sent Churchill a formal protest about the state of affairs in the Levant. In this wire the Frenchman alleged that the British Government was breaking its agreements not to encroach upon the French position in the Levant, and was constantly interfering in internal affairs there. This in turn encouraged the Arab world to believe that serious differences had arisen between Free France and Britain, which only helped the enemy. De Gaulle also suggested that Free French forces in the Middle East resented any signs that they were being disinherited in the Levant while they were pre-occupied with the fight against Rommel. He called on Churchill to restore and renew their agreements in the Levant States and end the abuses he had witnessed.³⁸

In Cairo, a reply was prepared for Churchill by Hopkinson and Cadogan. When Spears saw this draft, he declared it to be "dangerously weak" and argued that de Gaulle should not merely be reassured but challenged over his own attitude. More significantly, Spears argued that Britain did have at least one clear political aim in the Levant, which was to see that its guarantee of independence was carried out. Casey agreed that the first draft should be stiffened, and Churchill's reply to de Gaulle on 22 August clearly reflected the Spears touch:

Our principal concern in the political sphere is to ensure that no policy is adopted which may jeopardise our military security or interfere with the prosecution of the war. It is for this reason that we expect to be fully consulted beforehand on major...developments.

We are also concerned...that the proclamation issued by General Catroux...declaring the independence of Syria and the Lebanon and promising that the Mandate should be terminated, is effectively carried out. To this we are committed in...the whole Arab world.

None of this, de Gaulle was told, violated any agreement between Free France and the British, whose chief aim was Allied victory: "any action by our representatives in Syria...is directed towards that end".³⁹

De Gaulle promptly replied that this was unacceptable. Much of the argument now became repetitive, since de Gaulle was focussing on the fact of British involvement, at which he boggled, while the British reiterated its reason, which was military necessity. The Frenchman, with one eye on Spears, thought that this was a pretext for something more sinister. This argument proved to be interminable, but de Gaulle now introduced a new complication for the British. He raised the question of overall command of the Allied forces in the Levant, and pointed out that under the Lyttelton-de Gaulle agreement the French were entitled to take over command once their troops outnumbered the British forces in Syria. This was now the case, de Gaulle alleged, and he would assert his right unless political abuses were dealt with. He therefore called on Churchill to reconsider his position and to send Casey to Beirut where some solution could be reached.⁴⁰

When this was duly suggested by Eden, however, Casey disagreed. He was not prepared to leave Cairo when another German attack was imminent. In any case he thought the atmosphere in Beirut was unfavourable for constructive talks, and that de Gaulle ought to come to Cairo for a frank discussion. This stance was almost undermined by Hopkinson, who suggested a formula whereby de Gaulle would accept temporary British partnership in the Levant in return for a categorical assurance that France would retain her pre-eminence after the war. But Spears, declaring this to be "a complete betrayal of the Arabs, and the contrary of our declared policy", managed to squash the idea before it got off the ground, and Casey sent a firm message to de Gaulle on 29 August. Declaring that Anglo-Free French relations had reached "an acute stage", he invited de Gaulle to Cairo to seek some solution, as "urgent preoccupations" prevented him from leaving Cairo at that time. "Failing such a meeting", Casey warned, "I shall be obliged to submit the present position...to the Prime Minister".⁴¹

De Gaulle had his own pre-occupations, and he refused to leave Beirut. Ploughing over the old ground again, he concluded that "I shall be extremely sorry if you are unable...to discuss this grave matter with me". This gave the Minister of State some second thoughts. "Casey keeps on wishing to offer to come here to see de Gaulle", Spears noted in his diary:

Had to get him to authorise me to alter the message he proposed to send to de Gaulle in answer to the latter's reply of August 30th. I cannot understand why all these people are afraid of de Gaulle...

Once again Spears the strongman thwarted de Gaulle's tactics, and Casey forwarded a message in the name of Churchill, asking the Frenchman to return to London "with the least possible delay". De Gaulle chose to interpret this summons as a polite invitation, and said he would come when he could. Nevertheless the situation forced him to remain in Beirut at the moment, where he was "still prepared to [see] Mr. Casey".⁴²

De Gaulle was naturally disinclined to hurry off at Churchill's behest, and he still had some shots to fire. On 5 September Casey received an official request for the transfer of Allied command in the Levant to the Free French, with the suggestion that this should

be effected in five days' time! A mere two days had passed since Montgomery had held off Rommel at Alam Haifa, 60 miles from Alexandria, and de Gaulle's untimely request produced consternation and sheer disbelief among the Cairo authorities. It also produced a spate of signals in which the British fell over each other in their haste to refute the basis of de Gaulle's claim, which was that the Free French now had numerical superiority in the Levant. Ninth Army's first figures were wildly inaccurate, and their revised version still conflicted with Cairo's figures. "I suppose somebody knows what the size of our Army is", observed the disgusted Spears. Eventually it was decided that the British land forces in the Levant had a majority of about 14,000, and de Gaulle was informed that the facts did not support his request. In all the fuss, however, Spears was obliged once more to dissuade the wavering Casey from coming to Beirut.⁴³

Carrying the tension to its peak, as he put it, de Gaulle compiled a massive 40-page indictment of British misdemeanours in the Levant and sent it to Casey. In a covering letter he declared that Free French concessions "served as an encouragement or a pretext for British encroachments" and that "British policy... here substitutes pressure for collaboration". London had given him repeated assurances, "but I find here a practice and facts which do not accord with these assurances". De Gaulle's huge memorandum condemned the activities of Spears and alleged continual British meddling in every aspect of Syrian and Lebanese affairs. Even the wheat plan was described as a pretext for large-scale British encroachments.⁴⁴

Having waded through de Gaulle's philippics, Casey's long-suffering staff gave the Frenchman more marks for effort than content. So did Spears, who dismissed it as "an extraordinarily feeble document". On 12 September Casey sent the Foreign Office a summary of de Gaulle's allegations and a strongly-worded,

uncompromising rejection of every one of them. Casey concluded that de Gaulle seemed to be demanding a whole new deal over the Levant. Yet this would still have to safeguard British requirements, and some straight talking from Churchill himself seemed to be "the only hope of getting de Gaulle to see reason".⁴⁵

While Casey was deciding to tell the General to take all his troubles to London, de Gaulle himself was concluding that the time had come to break off the engagement in the Levant and to shift the scene of battle to England. The repercussions of his Syrian performance were being keenly felt in London, where Churchill's patience was at an end, and even Eden had begun to reprimand de Gaulle's subordinates, Dejean and Pleven. Pressed by Churchill, Eden had instructed the Treasury not to pay the Free French their monthly Syrian subsidy until de Gaulle agreed to return to London.* Moreover, de Gaulle had now manoeuvred himself into a position where, to expedite his return, the British had agreed to re-open fundamental questions concerning the Levant. He had therefore out-flanked Casey and Spears and transferred the dispute to London.

This was reason enough to go, but what finally triggered off de Gaulle's sudden departure was the issue of Madagascar - another Vichy territory - which the British were now linking with the Syrian question. In May the British had seized the harbour of Diego Suarez, lest the Japanese decided to use it as an Indian Ocean base. In September a larger British force was sent to take over the whole island. Thus on 9 September Eden summoned Dejean and Pleven and informed them of the Madagascar operations, and of the British intention to hand over the administration to the Free French. This intention, he said, had been upset by de Gaulle's extreme behaviour in Syria, and matters would have to be cleared up before anything was done for the Free French in Madagascar. This attitude (despite

* On the 9th of every month, the Free French received £300,000, and later in the month another £2-300,000 for their Syrian expenses alone. In Furlonge's words "they lived luxuriously on the British War Chest, which we found very irritating". (Interview, 17 May 1978).

Pleven's retort that they were being offered Madagascar in exchange for Syria) had some effect on de Gaulle, who was quickly informed.⁴⁷ On 13 September he spoke to the Press about "the complete concord" between Free France and Britain in the Levant. "He can talk of nothing now but solidarity between the Allies", noted Spears, adding that "the Madagascar bribe is an enormous one". De Gaulle has also sent a friendly message to Eden, announcing his departure: "the stakes were such that I could not hesitate", he recalled.⁴⁸

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While de Gaulle was returning to London via Free French Africa, Spears was reflecting on the impact of the Frenchman's visit: "My worst fears appear to have been realised. Two extraordinarily wet telegrams have arrived, one from [Cairo] and a much worse one from the Foreign Office. They appear to be getting out the olive branches already". Spears was indignant, and he fired off a strong corrective to London.*⁴⁹ "I fear it is not the case that [de Gaulle] has left Syria in somewhat chastened mood", he told the ever-hopeful Foreign Office:

On the contrary I am convinced that he feels himself to be in an excellent bargaining position and that once more rudeness, bullying, blackmail and intransigence have proved to be the best means of getting his way with the British...

De Gaulle's visit has done British prestige and security great harm and [we must] re-establish public confidence in our strength and in our promises.

Elections are essential.... In view of all that de Gaulle has publicly said, [many] conclude that we have merely come to a private arrangement with him to keep things in play till it is no longer necessary to take native opinion into account.

The Foreign Office, however, now seemed to think that elections need

* Spears' Counsellor, Lascelles, drafted such a stinging reply that even Spears thought it too strong and toned it down. Spears and his Counsellor, known as "Poison Pen Lascelles" (Fulfilment, p.242) appear to have been kindred spirits in some ways. Lascelles certainly had a strong sympathy for the local nationalists, a dislike of the Free French regime in the Levant, a tendency to regard the Foreign Office as a species of jellyfish, and an ability to articulate tough arguments. All authentic Spears qualities!

not be tied to a specific date or necessarily held in 1942. Spears reminded them that Cairo, despite a perilous phase in the Desert war, had thought an election announcement advantageous in August, that Catroux had never answered Casey's call for this announcement, and that it had long been agreed that to leave the date unspecified was to make any election promise futile. "Apart from the decidedly favourable turn in the military situation", Spears pointed out, "the only new development during the intervening period has been de Gaulle's bare-faced attempt to jockey us".⁵⁰

Churchill strongly agreed with Spears. "The only argument against the Syrian elections", he commented to Eden, "was the precarious situation in the Western Desert [and] this no longer holds....* our policy should be to insist upon a declaration that elections will be held before the end of the year". Eden, however, was able to deflect the Spears-Churchill thrust by quoting Casey's latest telegram of 20 September. This stated that any agreement reached in London should include an election commitment but should also allow some latitude in the timing. Churchill accepted this, and Spears was obliged to follow suit. De Gaulle had therefore won a major concession before he even arrived in London.⁵¹

This indeed confirmed for Spears the fears that he had expressed both officially and privately. "I have little doubt", he noted "that [de Gaulle] believes he will obtain not only Madagascar but much of what he wants here as well. I also think...he will get away with it". Spears, who had always hated anything remotely resembling appeasement, added that "we are still in the pre-Munich stage in our relations with [de Gaulle] ".⁵²

If this was so, there was one aspect of his emotive analogy from which Spears could derive some comfort: the pugnacity of Churchill. "I think it a great mistake" the Prime Minister told Eden on 22 September, "to let de Gaulle into Madagascar, which he will only use as another field for anti-British activities. Anyhow we cannot

* Montgomery and Alexander were building up massive forces at this time, in preparation for the decisive October-November offensive at Alamein.

take any decision until [we have dealt] with him about his recent misbehaviour".⁵³ Churchill's feelings were certainly not softened by his confrontation with de Gaulle on 30 September. "It couldn't have gone worse", groaned Harvey. "[Eden] said afterwards he had never seen [such] rudeness since Ribbentrop. Blank refusal to budge over Syrian questions, insistence on our evil motives". Churchill matched de Gaulle's mood, and when the Frenchman aired his grievances, Churchill retorted that the real difficulty everywhere was the General himself, who added to British burdens and made trouble wherever he went. Tempers were lost all round, and the two leaders reached the edge of a complete break.⁵⁴

Nevertheless, their subordinates on both sides were soon at work to find some accord over Syria. Dejean came from the Free French camp suggesting that elections be held in the spring of 1943, that the French claim for the Levant command might be dropped, and that a joint committee be established in London to solve difficulties which proved insoluble in Syria itself. Eden thought this was "a reasonable basis of negotiation".⁵⁵ As his secretary, Harvey, remarked:

the de Gaulle row rolls on [but] Dejean said [de Gaulle] would in fact agree to meet us over various Syrian points.... If once the professionals can get hold of this again and the prima donnas are kept out of the ring, we shall soon reach agreement. And Spears must go.⁵⁶

The eagerness with which the Foreign Office jumped at Dejean's formula showed that Spears' anxiety was justified. For such an agreement would postpone the elections for at least another eight months, and enable Catroux to by-pass Spears and Casey in any dispute by appealing to the suggested London committee. In return, the Free French would simply drop a claim for overall command in the Levant - but it was already clear from the figures provided that this claim was invalid according to the Lyttelton-de Gaulle agreements!

At the same time, de Gaulle's personal-approach tactics in the Levant seemed about to achieve the biggest Free French gain of all - the dismissal of Spears. This move, strongly favoured at the Foreign Office, was now proposed by none other than Casey. It will be recalled

that after de Gaulle's conversations with Gwynn and Holmes, Casey's staff had taken the view that Spears and Catroux should go if any new beginnings were to succeed in the Levant. The moment for this idea came when Eden sent Casey a wire reporting Dejean's suggested settlement in favourable terms and asking for Casey's views.⁵⁷ Casey's reply of 9 October embodied the proposal which his staff now considered unavoidable:

I appreciate that you are doing everything possible to create a "new deal" for Anglo-French relations in Syria... you will realise however that personal relations between General Spears and General Catroux have reached an acute stage of bitterness in...the past 12 months from which they are quite unlikely to recover... I believe the "new deal" will have to extend both to the French and British representatives if the future is to [be any] improvement on the past. In saying this I cast no reflection on the outstanding qualities of General Spears for whom I have the greatest respect and for whom there must be many other appropriate avenues of service. It is a...conflict of personalities which...can only be remedied by new appointments for both him and General Catroux.*

This was certainly a pleasant surprise for the Foreign Office, and Eden quickly scribbled a note to Churchill on Casey's telegram: "I think you should see this. Perhaps we could have a word about it one day next week". Churchill agreed to discuss it, but he added that "Spears has been right in this business, and I should be sorry to see Catroux go".⁵⁸

The movement to dislodge Spears foundered on the Churchillian reef. On 14 October, in a minute which also dealt with Madagascar, the Prime Minister made his feelings plain:

I do not think it would be a good thing to move either Spears or Catroux. Catroux gets on quite well with our Cairo people and the soldiers, and Spears has certainly defended, with great energy and ability, British rights in Syria.

* In the Spears papers at Churchill College, Cambridge, there is a very interesting letter from Casey (in SPRS 2738) stating that he did not on any occasion recommend or suggest to Churchill, or anyone else, the recall of Spears from his post!

All that Churchill suggested was some sort of scolding for the two naughty boys of Beirut, in which they should be told to behave on pain of joint expulsion. In such an event, Catroux should understand that "he would have no chance of being transferred to Madagascar".⁵⁹ This ended de Gaulle's 1942 campaign to get Spears out. But one man alone had prevented its success, and de Gaulle had managed to bring Cairo and the Foreign Office together in its support. Only Churchill stood between Spears and his many critics, and Churchill was to find that the demand for Spears' head would not just go away.

By this stage there were signs that de Gaulle, although unable to shift Spears, was winning on several other fronts. He was, for instance, getting Foreign Office support for his insistence on the continued validity of the mandate. On this point his many public references to the mandate had caused a long and heated argument between Cairo and the Foreign Office, which had helped to distract both from the fact that nothing was being done about an election announcement. However, Casey and his aides became so exasperated with London over this issue that they drew closer to Spears once more, a result which undid some of de Gaulle's efforts to have Spears removed.

In July, Casey's staff had become involved in the mandate argument which was being volleyed backwards and forwards between Spears and the Foreign Office. "When I was in Beirut", minuted Bennett, (Hopkinson's assistant), "I [saw] that they were thoroughly fed up with the stupid attitude of the Foreign Office [over] the Mandate". In Bennett's view, London's bookish emphasis on international law was due to their "impression that Syrian and Lebanese independence, though slow in developing, is a reality". But any observer could see that their independence was "a bad joke, and for all practical purposes the country has gone back to the pre-1941 position and is run simply as a French Mandate".⁶⁰

A few days later Casey entered the lists, repeating Bennett's remarks and telling the Foreign Office that "the Free French have, in spite of their promises and our declarations...succeeded in installing themselves in Syria in the position of their Vichy

predecessors". This was not at all what was intended, and the issue was not simply academic or moralistic. There were serious practical implications, because

Syrian and Lebanese opinion [is] that...we have found it expedient to conciliate the Free French.... it is therefore essential to preserve confidence that we shall not again abandon Syria to the French at the end of this war. If that confidence is seriously shaken, the last reason for Syrian attachment to Allied cause will have vanished. We cannot then blame them if they put their money on Germany. Moreover...fulfilment of war promises in Syria materially affects attitude of Iraq and other Arab countries. [This] reacts back directly on immediate war situation.

On these grounds Casey said that de Gaulle's attitude to the Mandate must not go unchallenged, for it strengthened the impression "that we intend to abandon Syria completely to the French after the war".⁶¹

Rommel was only sixty miles from Alexandria when Casey put these points to the Foreign Office, and the argument became painfully relevant when de Gaulle began to emphasise the mandate all over the Levant itself in August. Casey's aides grew more anxious and indignant, for, as Clayton pointed out,

De Gaulle has never before been quite so categorical ...that the Mandate exists and that the independence accorded to [Syria] is in virtue of and in the framework of the Mandate....Nowhere in Catroux's early declarations was such a thing implied - in fact, if words mean anything, the acquisition of independence was a consequence of the termination of the Mandate. 62

On 7 September Casey tackled London again, reporting that de Gaulle had now "carried a stage further his exploitation of continued technical existence of the Mandate....It is impossible to reconcile this with Catroux's declaration of June 1941 and subsequent proclamations of independence".⁶³

The Foreign Office, wedded to its juridical considerations, refused to accept Casey's argument and obviously did not regard the matter as urgent. Its reply, sent as a low priority wire, did not even reach Cairo until 7 October! Its remote and legalistic contents dismayed Casey's men. London's lawyers denied any conflict between the

continued validity of the mandate and Catroux's declaration of June 1941. The latter, they argued, meant "to start on a course which would bring the Mandate to an end, not to end the Mandate there and then". Moreover, London unblushingly admitted, such a meaning had been suggested to Catroux in the first place as a way to avoid any later claim that the mandate had suddenly ended on 8 June 1941.⁶⁴

Casey's staff were flabbergasted by this casuistry, which was "not only dishonest but extremely short-sighted" in relation to the Arab world.⁶⁵ Their feelings were summed up in Clayton's brilliant and bitter memorandum:

we now know where we are going. At the Syrian round-table conference in 1961 [sic] the heads of the Foreign Office [will claim] that the words 'independence', 'sovereign state', 'free' etc., only meant to say that there would be no serious change in the Mandatory system for Syria. The words "desormais vous serez souverains et independents" will have been finally expunged from our records....What has happened to the people who last year sent an indignant wire to the effect that "it was never the intention of H.M.G. that the Free French should step into the position occupied by General Dentz"?

..I was just going to date this note 1919, but realised that time actually has passed though our method of beguiling the lesser breeds outside the law and our faculty for saying what we don't mean has not changed. I am sorry for our Minister in Beirut.

On this note, Cairo concluded that nothing more could be done: "The F.O. lawyers are a formidable addition to our difficulties", Casey's Secretary grimly observed.⁶⁶

This was a distinct victory for de Gaulle, and in this case the pro-French elements in Britain's contradictory Levant policy had prevailed. On the whole, de Gaulle had London's support for his position that the mandate was unaffected by Catroux's dramatic and calculated declaration of June 1941. Yet this proved to be too clever by half. What de Gaulle and the Foreign Office seemed to forget was that the Levant was not populated by devotees of international law but by people who were tired of Anglo-French doublespeak. These took Catroux's independence proclamations, and especially the British guarantee, as undertakings which could not be dismissed except by a naked betrayal

of 1919 dimensions. Within a year, the Lebanese precipitated a showdown over the mandate question, and de Gaulle's fragile legalisms were outflanked by political realities.

At the end of 1942, however, it was by no means clear that any such reversal would occur. In the Middle East, the war had receded after the British victory at Alamein, and with it went London's most immediate anxieties about support in the Arab world. In London itself the Free French were doing well in a marathon of tedious and repetitive negotiations set off by Dejean's proposals, which the Foreign Office accepted on 8 October. A week later, however, de Gaulle removed Dejean in favour of Pleven and talks began all over again. After some abortive attempts to replace the Lyttelton-de Gaulle text with a new agreement, both parties agreed to fall back on the Dejean proposals and abandon the quest for a new interpretative agreement on the Levant.⁶⁷

By December 1942, according to the original Free French assurances, newly-elected governments should have been firmly established in the Levant States. Instead, the Free French had now agreed (in principle) to hold elections in the spring of 1943, and had an arrangement whereby intractable disputes were to be referred to an Anglo-French committee in London. They also had Britain's public commitment to a Free French administration in Madagascar. As a footnote to these gains, they had come within an ace of toppling Spears and had successfully re-asserted their Syrian mandate, with the aid of the Foreign Office. Much of the credit for all this belonged to de Gaulle, whose performance in the Levant had completely upset the old arrangements. Catroux had also played his part, and in the winter of 1942-43 this old stager led the British a merry dance before he finally announced the demise of his ancien regime.

N O T E S

- 1 Lyttelton tel., 3 January 1942, F0954/xv.1.
- 2 Eden tel., 7 January 1942, F0954/xv.1.
- 3 Lyttelton tel., 5 December 1941, F0954/xv.1.
- 4 Spears tel., 29 January 1942, SPRS II/6.
- 5 Spears, "Notes on a Conversation with General de Gaulle", 11 March 1942, SPRS II/6.
- 6 F0371/31471/E2121; 31480/E2124, E2130.
- 7 F0371/31471/E2158.
- 8 F0371/31948/Z3024, 31471/E2268; de Gaulle (Documents) i.338f.
- 9 F0371/31471/E2224.
- 10 F0371/31471/E2360; 31472/E2503.
- 11 Spears, Fulfilment, p.186.
- 12 Richard Pearse, Three Years in the Levant (1949), p.181.
- 13 Spears, Fulfilment, pp.173-202 and Spears Diary; Lyttelton Chandos, p.260f; Coghill, War Diary and Notes on Wartime Jottings; Furlonge interview, 17 May 1978.
- 14 Spears, Fulfilment, p.185; Spears Diary, 2 July 1942.
- 15 Pearse, p.11f.
- 16 Catroux tel., 29 April 1942; de Gaulle tel., 4 May 1942: de Gaulle (Documents) i.342ff.
- 17 Catroux tel., 20 May 1942; de Gaulle tel., 26 May 1942: de Gaulle (Documents) i.350ff.
- 18 F0371/31473/E3569, E3764.
- 19 Casey tel., 27 June 1942, F0921/14.
- 20 Spears tel., 30 June 1942; Spears tel., 1 July 1942; Hopkinson minute: F0921/14.
- 21 Catroux letters, 25 July 1942; Spears letter, 25 July 1942; Beirut Legation tel., 27 July 1942: F0921/12.
- 22 Casey tel., ("13 Saving"), 3 August 1942, F0921/12.
- 23 Casey tel., ("1207"), 3 August 1942, F0921/12.

- 24 Casey tel., 5 August 1942, F0921/14.
- 25 de Gaulle (Documents) ii.29; F0371/31949/Z6442; de Gaulle, ii.28.
- 26 Lord Casey, Personal Experience 1939-1946 (1962), p.126; de Gaulle ii.21f; F0371/31475/E5070; F0921/15.
- 27 Coghill, War Diary, p.18.
- 28 Spears tel., 29 August 1942, SPRS II/6.
- 29 Wright minute, 10 August 1942, PREM 3 422/10.
- 30 Report by Gwynn on a talk with de Gaulle, 15 August 1942, F0921/15.
- 31 Harvey Diary, 27 August 1942.
- 32 Furlonge interview, 17 May 1978.
- 33 Holmes tel., 25 August 1942; Brigadiers Sherston and Clayton minutes, 26 August 1942: F0921/15.
- 34 Spears, Fulfilment, p.170.
- 35 de Gaulle (Documents) ii.53f; de Gaulle, ii.33.
- 36 Spears Diary, 23 August 1942 (Spears, Fulfilment, repeats some passages from this section of the diary).
- 37 Spears Diary, 11 September 1942.
- 38 de Gaulle tel., 14 August 1942, F0371/31475/E5071 and de Gaulle (Documents) ii.37f.
- 39 F0371/31475/E5072, E5073.
- 40 de Gaulle (Documents) ii.43; F0371/31475/E5167.
- 41 Casey tel., 27 August 1942, F0921/15; Spears Diary, 29 August 1942; Casey tel., 29 August 1942, F0921/15 and de Gaulle (Documents) ii.45.
- 42 de Gaulle tel., 30 August 1942, F0921/15 and de Gaulle (Documents) ii.45f.; Spears Diary 2 September 1942; Churchill/Casey tel., 31 August 1942, F0921/15; de Gaulle tel., 1 September 1942, F0371/31476/E5184 and de Gaulle (Documents) ii.46f.
- 43 Spears Diary, 5-8 September 1942; F0371/31476/E5260, E5319, E5268, 31477/E5601.
- 44 de Gaulle letter and memorandum, 7 September 1942, F0921/16.
- 45 Spears Diary, 16 September 1942; Casey tel., 12 August 1942, F0921/16.

- 46 Churchill minute, 19 September 1942 and Eden reply, 22 September 1942, PREM 3 422/14.
- 47 F0371/31905/Z6976.
- 48 Spears Diary, 13, 14 September 1942; de Gaulle, ii.34.
- 49 Spears Diary, 16 September 1942.
- 50 Spears tel., 17 September 1942, PREM 3 422/14.
- 51 Churchill minute, 19 September 1942, Eden minute, 22 September 1942, PREM 3 422/14; Casey tel., F0371/31477/E5596.
- 52 Spears Diary, 14 and 16 September, 1942.
- 53 Churchill minute, 22 September 1942, PREM 3 265/11.
- 54 Harvey Diary, 1 October 1942; F0371/31950/Z7530; de Gaulle, ii.38f.
- 55 Eden minute, 6 October 1942, PREM 3 422/14.
- 56 Harvey Diary, 2 October 1942.
- 57 Eden tel., 7 October 1942, PREM 3 422/14.
- 58 Casey tel., and Eden minute, 9 October 1942; Churchill minute, 12 October 1942: PREM 3 422/14.
- 59 Churchill minute, 14 October 1942, PREM 3 265/11 and PREM 3 422/14.
- 60 Bennett minute, 18 July 1942, F0921/12.
- 61 Casey tel., 24 July 1942, F0921/12.
- 62 Clayton minute, 31 July 1942, F0921/12.
- 63 Casey tel., 7 September 1942, F0921/12.
- 64 Foreign Office tel., ("84 Saving") 11 September (arrived 7 October) 1942, F0921/13.
- 65 Bennett minute, 11 October 1942, F0921/13.
- 66 Clayton note, 11 October 1942, Sir A. Rucker minute, 12 October 1942, F0921/13.
- 67 See Woodward, iv.246-252, for a documented journey through this frustrating and repetitive series of negotiations.

The elections were...a signal defeat for the French, and it was to be expected that the new governments would not be slow to attack the French limitations on their independence.

G.E.Kirk*

Ride a cock horse to the Syrian cross,
To see a fine General ride on his high horse.
Spears on his fingers and spears on his toes,
He shall make trouble wherever he goes.

Ninth Army jingle⁺

In the affairs of the Levant States, 1943 was a year of transition and dramatic change. It began with Catroux's last procrastinations and ended with the triumph of nationalist administrations, reluctantly but unavoidably protected by the British. Between these contrasts came a curious summer of caretaker governments and a growing uneasiness in the Lebanon, where the interim administration exceeded its authority, created new confusions, and caused the Lebanese elections to be held even later than those in Syria. In both states, the polls were delayed until the late summer by Catroux's final evasions and by the immense problems of arranging elections in an undeveloped and undemocratic environment. Yet it was, above all, the Great Election Year for the Levant States, a year when simple hopes were articulated and apron strings were torn away. The Levantines bluntly repudiated French tutelage, while Spears matched their mood with an astonishing assault on the fundamental policy of the Foreign Office, whose servant he was supposed to be. It was the year in which all parties burnt their boats.

The year began with little indication of momentous changes, for Catroux's regime still survived, and Catroux himself was now playing the absentee landlord. In December 1942 the Free French position was that the Delegate-General would make the necessary announcements in the Levant on the coming elections and the interim caretaker governments. But Catroux had come to London and nothing could be

* A Short History of the Middle East (1964), p.207.

+ Quoted by Walter Lippmann, New York Herald Tribune, 16 November 1943.

done in the Levant until he returned. The possibilities of this arrangement were not lost on the shrewd Frenchman, who, in the next three months, effectively suspended all meaningful action in the Levant by simply not being there.

Catroux returned to Beirut just before Christmas, only to inform Spears that he would shortly be visiting the United States. He assured the British Minister that he would make the election announcements before he left, and agreed that voting should take place early in March. In his absence he would be represented by Jean Helleu, formerly Vichy's Ambassador to Turkey. The two Frenchmen were to confer in Beirut before Catroux left, Spears was told. But Catroux left on 25 December, without making any announcements, and Helleu arrived on the 29th without the authorisation to announce anything in Catroux's absence!

These antics infuriated Spears, who told the Foreign Office that "it is inadmissible that a question of such vital importance to the Levant States should be allowed to hang fire merely through Catroux's fortuitous absence".¹ For once London shared Spears' sentiments. Sir Maurice Peterson* summed it all up in a minute of 9 January 1943:

The Fighting French have promised us twice in writing, and many times verbally, that the [election] announcements...would be made before the end of 1942. They have not kept this promise. [Pleven said they] wanted to see Catroux again before it was done. This is quite absurd ...since all Catroux has to do is to announce the repeal of certain arrêtées suspending constitutional life.... This could be done either by Catroux in England or perfectly well by Helleu...

We know...that Catroux, before leaving [Beirut] took the attitude that elections were now less urgent because the Axis menace had been driven further off. This is also absurd since the Fighting French previously contended that elections could not be held because the Axis menace was so near. 2

On 12 January Peterson saw Catroux in London and "reproached him with his failure to announce the elections before the end of 1942".

* Deputy Under-Secretary of State Peterson was now handling the Syrian problem. He continually crossed swords with Spears, and the two almost invariably took opposite positions. Their relations deteriorated into something like a private war, with Peterson pressing for Spears' dismissal.

The Frenchman's excuses were that his short December visit to Beirut had been disrupted by Islamic holidays, and that he had been "obliged to allow himself some time to 'calm people down' since Sir E. Spears, contrary to [his] instructions...had let the electoral cat out of the bag". This allegation neatly disarmed Peterson, who had no confidence in Spears' discretion, and Catroux got away with a vague "hope" that he might still form interim governments in time to hold elections in March. He added that he would be leaving London "next week".³

This timetable was as worthless as all its predecessors. Another five weeks passed before Catroux returned to the Middle East, and in all that time Helleu was only permitted to announce that Catroux would be back "in the near future" to make the actual election announcements.⁴ By this time, of course, Catroux had become entangled in the tortuous maze of the Giraud affair.* In January he accompanied de Gaulle to Casablanca to meet Giraud, Roosevelt and Churchill, and in mid-February he spent several days in Algiers before flying on to Cairo.⁵ While all this was top-priority for the Free French, there was no respectable reason why Helleu should not have been authorised to stand in for Catroux and get things moving in the Levant. The delay reflected the whole Gaullist attitude to political evolution in the Levant, i.e., reluctance and condescension. It also reflected the desire to instal convenient caretaker governments which would allow the French enough latitude to guide the course of the elections (see pp. 202, 209). The Free French were apparently unwilling to trust this tricky task to anyone else but Catroux.

On 17 February Catroux arrived in Cairo, where he discussed his imminent tasks with Casey, and suggested that the interim governments should be nominated by the outgoing authorities to avoid the accusation that the elections were being rigged by the Allies. This was neat, as the existing governments had been hand-picked by Catroux and could make no valid proclamation without his consent as Delegate-General.

*Operation Torch, the Anglo-American occupation of French North Africa, was carried out in November 1942. Free France was excluded from it. The five-star French General Henri Giraud was brought in by the Americans, who had no time for de Gaulle and hoped to neutralise Vichy's 120,000 soldiers. Although things went wrong and the Allied landings were opposed, hostilities were ended through the agency of Darlan. When Darlan was assassinated, there began a complex game which ended with the eclipse of Giraud and the triumph of de Gaulle in Algiers.

On being asked to keep Spears "fully informed", Catroux agreed, but added that while Churchill had disowned any ambition in Syria, he hoped that all British authorities there were inspired by the same idea!

This provocative remark preceded Catroux to Beirut and put Spears on full alert.⁶ Nevertheless the Frenchman was at his agreeable and conciliatory best when he conferred with Spears on 21 February, and there were no fireworks. Instead, Catroux agreed with every suggestion which Spears made, stressed his pre-occupation with North Africa, and said he was "fed up" with election wrangles and only wanted to conclude things swiftly and amicably. Spears, at first suspicious, reported that Catroux's attitude was "most satisfactory" and that the interview was "very friendly throughout".⁷

The Foreign Office was skeptical about this second Beirut honeymoon, and expected another quick estrangement.⁸ Yet throughout the month which Catroux spent in the Levant before returning to Algiers, he co-operated as never before with Spears, while the latter returned this goodwill and reserved his aggressive onslaughts for the Foreign Office. Catroux was apparently in a great hurry to return to North Africa, and he needed Spears' assistance to instal his caretaker governments and launch the electoral period. This was no easy task, for his long delays had put the political communities into a restless and rebellious mood. In the Lebanon, President Nacacche was enjoying the considerable benefits of his position and refused to resign, representing his personal motives as a blow for Lebanese independence. But he reckoned without the unprecedented Spears-Catroux combination, and was brushed aside. In Syria, the process coincided with mob violence over bread shortages and local corruption. Once again, close co-operation between Spears and Catroux helped to restore order and enabled Catroux to make tolerable arrangements in Damascus.⁹

After nine months on the life-support of Free French evasions, Catroux's ancien regime finally expired at the end of March, 1943. In the Lebanon the restoration of the Constitution, elections, and an interim government were proclaimed by Catroux on 18 March. Although

he had to rush away to Algiers on the following day, Catroux's almost identical proclamation to Syria was published on 25 March.¹⁰ For the next few months, the Lebanese caretaker was Dr. Ayoub Tabet, who, despite his "obstinate and cantankerous nature", was thought to be "generally respected for his integrity and independence of character". In Syria, the same role was assigned to Catroux's second choice, Ata Bey Ayoubi, who was described as a "sympathiser" of the nationalist bloc. Catroux had hoped to appoint the neutral Hashim Atassi, but this man declined in the face of nationalist opposition and the simmering unrest in Syria.¹¹

Catroux's proclamations included the formula "in agreement with the British Government", and gave great satisfaction to Spears, who proudly told the Foreign Office that they contained "every one of the points I have contended were either essential or important if... independence was to be real". Moreover, Catroux's appeal to the people and his references to freedom expressed "views which we can wholeheartedly support". Recalling a year of strife with Catroux, de Gaulle and the Foreign Office itself, Spears declared that this happy result "justifies the very hard and prolonged struggle I have had in the past".^{* 12}

This struggle had cost Spears more than he knew. His relentless harrying of Catroux, his eye-for-an-eye contest with de Gaulle, his rows with Holmes and his attitude to the Foreign Office had aroused much resentment. While he could still rely on Churchill not to disown him, and while he ultimately found a friend in Casey, he had many enemies. The process which had finally ended Catroux's disguised imperium had damaged Spears as well and there would be no "well-done" from the Foreign Office. Nor would there be much peace and quiet, for Catroux's proclamations had unleashed all the clamour and intrigue of Levantine politics.

* Apparently it did not occur to Spears that Catroux's attitude was determined by his anxiety to get back to North Africa. Spears could have found himself in a personal dilemma if he had suspected that, in expediting Catroux's return to Algiers, he might have been assisting de Gaulle to get a foothold in North Africa, which was a far greater prize than the Levant. See Appendix H.

On 19 March 1943 Spears made a stirring speech on the radio, warmly commending the proclamation which Catroux had just made in the Lebanon. Catroux had "spoken as a sincere friend of your country", Spears told his listeners, who were receiving their Good News a week earlier than their fellow-subjects in Syria. The Lebanon would now have "the means to secure a place in the great brotherhood of free nations". Moreover, the new Chamber would have no nominated members, for Catroux had ruled that all seats were to be occupied by elected representatives.* "Your parliament will thus be free, free as ours, free as those of the United Nations", Spears orated.

In making this speech, Spears described the coming Lebanese democracy in glowing terms, and indulged in a little propaganda. On behalf of England, "the oldest democracy of the world", and as "a member of the oldest of Parliaments", he declared that

a people can claim itself master of its own destinies only if each citizen, without fear or restraint, free from all influence, has been able to vote for the parliamentary candidate of his own choice. 13

Alas, if this was the case, then the Lebanon (and Syria, for that matter) would be a mere caricature of the independent democracy which Spears had depicted. "Anybody would think Sir E. Spears had never seen a foreign election", snorted one London observer when the corrupt realities emerged and Spears complained.¹⁴

There was much ambivalence in Spears' attitude to the coming elections. On one hand, despite the lofty rhetoric of his wireless speech, he realised that the old local traditions of "government by subterranean intrigue" could not be stopped overnight.¹⁵ On the other hand he was anxious to counter one particular version of this - the manoeuvres and manipulations of pro-French elements. When faced with increasing evidence of French bribery and intrigue, he sought the advice of his local expert, Furlonge. Apparently he went so far as to ask whether to fight fire with fire, but the astute Furlonge advised him not to waste a penny, since bribery guaranteed nothing in the Levant and the French would soon discover this for themselves.¹⁶

* Catroux had set aside a Catch-22 section of the Lebanese constitution which stipulated that one-third of the Chamber be nominated by the President (himself a French nominee), and that this arrangement could not be altered by less than 75% of the Chamber.

This proved to be sound advice when French expectations in the Lebanon were confounded by a nationalist victory.

Meanwhile the Minister of State had also become aware of the nature of Levantine politics, and was now showing a distinctly pro-Spears attitude in his dealings with the Foreign Office. At the end of 1942 he had gone to London for consultations, and submitted a tough report on the Free French situation. After telling Peterson that "the present state of affairs was extremely humiliating to the British", he urged the Foreign Office to press the election issue with the Free French: "While it might be true that the Elections would not be free in the [English] sense... this need not be a serious objection so long as the Free French did not deliberately exclude all the candidates who happened to favour the British". This was precisely Spears' view, and for good measure Casey stoutly defended the Beirut Minister on several other troublesome points.¹⁷

The developing Spears-Casey axis was to be an important determinant in the decisions of 1943, and London did not fail to notice the emerging combination. Foreign Office solutions, Harvey wrote, were being "questioned by the Minister of State, Casey, and by [his deputy, Lord] Moyne....both have taken to the spell of Spears who works ceaselessly to wreck Anglo-Free French relations".¹⁸ This note of hysteria became more pronounced as Casey and Spears drew closer in the early months of 1943, and as Spears peppered London with alarming political reports, complaints and outright reprimands.

A great row blew up over several questions of military import being settled in London over the heads of Spears and Holmes, and Spears roundly told Cadogan that the Foreign Office was letting him down.¹⁹ "Eastern Department have for long kept silent", an offended Secretary commented in an attached minute for Cadogan. "But there are limits and...either Sir E. Spears is out to have a quarrel with the Foreign Office or he is so overwrought by the difficulties of his post that he needs a rest and a change of scene".²⁰ Cadogan sighed: "Spears is a

trial. But while he remains where he is, we must try not to get too worked up about him".²¹

Meanwhile the Scourge of Eastern Department was giving his version to Churchill, as the two old friends motored out to lunch at Casey's villa near the Pyramids*:

I had a long talk with Winston and....told him of the difficulties I was having with the Foreign Office and that these were very much the same as those which Casey was having. I explained...how the French short-circuit the Minister of State by referring everything to London and how London defeats all our efforts by listening to their complaints...

Spears found the Prime Minister "extraordinarily nice and friendly" and, conveniently, inclined to abominate all things French:

With perhaps some slight exaggeration [!] I said in spite of everything my fundamental feelings towards the French nation had not altered, to which he replied that his had, that he found them either defeatist or arrogant and the latter were perhaps the most trying of all. De Gaulle was the worst of the lot.

Finally Churchill invited Spears to write to him, by-passing the Foreign Office, if things got too bad. He dismissed Eden's possible objections by asserting that "he and Anthony were as one person". Nothing could have been further from the truth on the issue of de Gaulle and the Free French.²²

This experience evidently gave Spears a second wind in his contest with the Foreign Office, and after a few more testy telegrams, Spears outdid himself with a closely-typed ten-page attack on London's whole approach to the Levant issues. On 8 March Casey showed where his sympathies lay by agreeing to forward this explosive paper to London. He described it as "a forthright hard-hitting memorandum written under the cumulative stress of eighteen months of frustration".²³ This was a monumental understatement, for Spears had arguably set a new record for the most undiplomatic language in the history of the Foreign Office. Certainly there can be few British diplomats who ever

* Churchill was in Cairo en route to (North African) Tripoli, and to Algiers.

accused the Foreign Office itself of constituting a Fifth Column!

Attacking London's assumption that Britain was dealing with genuine allies in the Levant, Spears said that the Free French had really pursued, at British expense, "the most narrow and selfish policy conceivable", which was to tighten their grip on the territories wherever possible:

None has played this game better than General Catroux himself who has proved to be a master at procrastination and a pioneer in the field of sophistry...

Catroux and his clique [have enjoyed] mysterious support in London.... The definition of a Fifth Column is, I take it, a body which, consciously or unconsciously, impedes or betrays the national effort by obeying the suggestions of a foreign authority... the enthusiasm of our people on the spot is damped down...by the feeling that the French, disposing of mysterious powers and influences in London, will always in the end get their way...

Such a state of affairs has come about because de Gaulle has been built up on a pedestal every stone of which is a retreat, a lack of firmness on our part.

After a scornful attack on Peterson's argument, that if Britain imposed its will within the French Empire then the Americans might do the same in Britain's Far Eastern possessions*, Spears returned to his main theme:

As seen from here, it is all too evident that this consideration is the overriding one in London: 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... 24

The Foreign Office was deeply shocked and offended. In the immediate post-Chamberlain years there could be no more deadly accusation than that of appeasement. This, and the bruising impact of Spears' blunt language, brought all of Peterson's professional resentment to the surface:

* Spears retorted that American policy in the Pacific would certainly not be softened by any British policy in the Levant.

my feeling is that we have recently had more than enough of General Spears' private representations...

Indeed the indulgence which is extended to this tiresome Member of Parliament, who is quite unsuited to hold a diplomatic post, must remain in glaring contrast to the [treatment of] mere professional diplomats holding posts of at least equal difficulty. 25

Eden, unable to deal with Spears as he liked, decided to ignore his controversial memorandum altogether. But Spears fired off yet another complaint against the Foreign Office on 2 April. On 21 April Eden replied that

If we see the French here over Levantine questions we are allowing the French to intrigue with us: if we do not see them, we are being insufficiently firm. What do you expect a poor Department to do?

I hope there may now be an end to these controversies.... 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...is dictated by considerations which are quite outside the scope of the Eastern Department. 26

This significant statement of priorities was not well-calculated to pacify Spears, who suspected that the Levant States might be sold out again in the name of an Anglo-French entente. On the same day, Caccia wrote to Lascelles in Beirut and frankly confessed that Eastern Department was now being forced to take a back seat:

the inescapable fact [is] that our requirements in the Levant have continually to be considered as a part of our policy to the French as a whole. [Thus Eastern Department] as the Cinderella of the party are apt to have to give way. For instance, if de Gaulle is behaving himself, we are told that it would be highly undesirable [to have] a first-class row in the Levant States. 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... 27

This pathetic confession revealed a state of affairs which helps to explain why Spears' favourite adjective for the Foreign Office was "wet". Caccia's letter was inside confirmation of the way in which de Gaulle had run psychological rings round most of his British

contacts and reduced them to an attitude which was inadequate to the point of being abject. For however largely Europe loomed in any realistic British foreign policy, and however much Anglo-French relations had to be the cornerstone of that policy, there was no excuse for the deference which was frequently shown to the volcanic personality of de Gaulle. It is a measure of his success that a Foreign Office Department whose interests collided with the General's should describe itself as the Cinderella of the party. For in terms of relative power within the anti-Axis alliance, Free France itself was a Cinderella.

The inevitable effect of the communications from Eden and Caccia was to confirm Spears' conviction that no effort should be spared in opposing Gaullist aims in the Levant and challenging the backsliding tendencies of the Foreign Office with regard to the Levant and the Arab world in general. The most dangerous implication of Caccia's letter was that it would take a first-class crisis to arrest London's tendency to downgrade the issues of the Levant:

The one exception...is, of course, that we will always support any measure which [Spears], the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, and the Minister of State all think urgently and vitally necessary for the military security of our troops in the area. 28

Six months later these words proved to be fateful, and there can be no doubt that Spears pondered London's "exception" during the November crisis in the Lebanon, when he was urged to make every allowance for the French and to counsel the Lebanese not to precipitate a full-scale emergency. But the Lebanese had sensed that something drastic would be necessary to finish off the French mandate, and Spears knew that they would never get London's support for this objective under normal conditions. Therefore there had to be some confrontation with the French which aroused the Arab world, raised British anxieties in the Middle East, and re-activated the British pledge to guarantee independence in the Levant. This was the logic of the situation for the nationalists, and it was too much to expect that Spears, who sympathised with the Lebanese and despised the local

French, would do anything very energetic to dampen the nationalists' ardour. After all, both Spears and Casey had long been adamant that the mandate was now a dead letter, and that the Foreign Office was being hopelessly academic about it.

Not all of Spears' energies were directed against his London adversaries in the spring of 1943. He was also discovering what a feverish level of intrigue had been unleashed by Catroux's pre-electoral period, and beginning to realise that in Dr Tabet, the temporary Lebanese Head of State, he had inherited another curious problem. "Dr Tabet dined with me last night", Spears noted on 17 April. "Tabet will be extremely difficult. He is an obstinate and narrow-minded man with most definite limitations".²⁹ This was the standard description for Tabet, who was widely regarded as cantankerous but honest. As a Protestant and a believer in a pro-French Christian Lebanon, he was also something of an enclave within an enclave, and a law unto himself. On finding himself at the helm, he proceeded to implement some of his pet schemes for administrative and social reform. These, according to a Spears Mission report, were all very admirable in themselves, but Tabet was so preoccupied with them that he began to prolong the pre-election period in order to continue his version of Enlightened Despotism.³⁰

By the beginning of May it was evident that Tabet was in no hurry to hold the election. At a Press conference on 27 April he outlined his schemes for improving the Lebanon and then baldly invited journalists to debate in print the issue of the election date. "It was already clear", the Foreign Office was told, that

Tabet felt determined in his own mind to resist British pressure for early elections, and that this device of a press referendum was merely a procrastinating manoeuvre; for the severity of the censorship and the control of newsprint is such that many newspaper proprietors would hesitate to express views at variance with those which Dr Tabet is known to hold.... 31

Likewise the Spears Mission chronicler recorded that Tabet soon proved to be obstructive towards the electoral arrangements:

Despite constant British pressure on him to fix the date of elections, he resorted to one pretext after another to avoid doing so; first, so as not to interfere with the harvest; then, so that he might have time to complete his administrative reforms...and lastly, because in his opinion the electoral law needed revising. 32

Further delays were caused by the baffling problem of compiling an electoral register in a land which had no grassroots democratic framework. In this sense the coming elections were an absurdity. Outwardly they purported to be a literate and rational exercise in free choice. Yet the Levant was a by-word for intimidation, bribery, corruption and Press censorship. Outside Beirut and Damascus, the level of illiteracy and ignorance was appalling. Vast numbers of voters could not even read the ballot paper. "Even when they knew the names they had no idea for what they were voting", Pearse snorted. "They did not care much. It was all a huge joke, a droll sort of game". 33

Nevertheless Spears and his staff kept up the pressure on the reluctant Tabet in the Lebanon. In Syria, where the French had more or less written off their hopes of securing a favourable result, it was a case of overcoming the problems of poor administration, distance and illiteracy in order to obtain passable electoral registers. The greatest controversy was in the Lebanon, where the French believed that their chosen candidates would win a satisfactory majority, and Spears did what he could to block their intrigues. British vigilance in these matters became an issue in London after the arrest on 26 April of one Rashid Mokaddam in Tripoli. Mokaddam, a boon companion of the French Conseiller in Tripoli, was a notorious smuggler and racketeer. He was arrested by British military police on suspicion of possessing hashish and suborning British personnel in connection with the drug traffic. But Mokaddam was also the most prominent pro-French electoral candidate in the region, and he had been using his local muscle to 'discourage' the opposition and to strengthen the chances of other pro-French candidates. Spears and

Holmes wanted the man deported, but the Free French insisted that this was a disguised interference with the electoral process and that Mokaddam must be released. They even threatened to arrest his main political rivals to redress the balance. ³⁴

It was against this farcical background that the new Gaullist Commissioner for Foreign Affairs, Massigli, called at the Foreign Office on 11 May. He proceeded to complain to Peterson about the "great and unnecessary excitement which Sir E. Spears and his lieutenants were showing in view of the approaching elections". He also alleged that Spears Mission officers were advising people not to collaborate with the caretaker government, a complaint which reflected British resistance to Tabet's electoral procrastination. Massigli threw in the revealing comment that "the elections were our doing, and that they would serve no useful purpose", but Peterson rejected this statement. "I don't see what we are to do with this complaint", Peterson minuted afterwards:

Unfortunately the terms on which we are with Sir E. 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 counter-blast which will reverberate through Downing Street. ³⁵

Despite Massigli's attitude to the elections, which was a glaring reflection on the official Free French line, it apparently did not occur to Peterson that the complaint might have been made to take some of the heat off French electoral tactics, which could ill afford any close scrutiny. Coghill's security officers reported "colossal bribing and intimidation" as the general rule during this period. ³⁶

By June 1943 the election issue in the Levant was becoming acute, as Tabet continued to tinker with the timing and others, in customary fashion, tinkered with the outcome of it all. The Mokaddam affair was developing into a heated Anglo-Free-French row, aggravated by the unsatisfactory relations between Spears and the Foreign Office and the fact that Casey supported Spears. It was decided that Casey should come to London for consultations, and the

Minister of State in turn decided to bring Spears along with him. This did nothing for Spears-Whitehall relations, but it certainly helped Casey to cope with the Foreign Office on its home ground. Casey and Spears - both Churchill appointees - also took the opportunity to emphasise their position during private visits to Chequers, to the further discomfiture of the Foreign Office.

On 25 June Spears went along to see Peterson in Eastern Department, and the mutual dislike was confirmed. "There was no question of even attempting to discuss the general situation in Syria", Spears commented.³⁷ Two days later, Spears had a long talk with Churchill after lunch at Chequers and attempted to peddle his whole Anglo-Arab vision. But the Prime Minister rejected the argument "that it would be difficult to develop the Middle East satisfactorily unless all the countries composing it accepted their directives from Great Britain". Furthermore Churchill, who had already warned Spears that he supported the idea of a Jewish state, would "not hear...of our taking the place of the French in the Levant", as Spears suggested. "The French may have the same position we have in Iraq", Churchill stated, adding that the native population would need support for a long time. "That guidance", Churchill stressed, "should come from the French".

Although discouraged in his wider vision of the Middle East, Spears still received Churchill's backing in his immediate tasks:

the Prime Minister was deeply indignant at the Mokaddam story and said that these French mal-practices must stop. He told me he would give me complete and absolute backing in maintaining the British point of view...

In a more personal sense, too, Churchill was still backing Spears:

He told me innumerable attempts had been made to displace me and that many English people had pleaded I should be replaced because the French so hated me. To this he had always answered that anybody could be on good terms with the French for about a fortnight if they gave way...that I was in fact literally the only man he knew who really stood up to them effectually and did not hesitate to have a head-on collision if needed; I knew how to stop the rot in time...

The conversation ended with Churchill abominating de Gaulle and expressing "a very poor opinion of the French generally".³⁸

Two days later, when Casey and Spears met Cadogan, the Cairo Minister came out strongly in support of Spears. "Casey was very outspoken about Peterson who really is a hopeless case", Spears noted, and unwisely went on to conclude that almost everybody except Peterson and Baxter was "in sympathy with our point of view".³⁹ In buoyant mood, and at the request of the Foreign Office, Spears prepared a memorandum on Anglo-French relations in the Levant. This he proceeded to distribute to Churchill and several other sympathisers in London, which was certainly not what the Foreign Office had in mind.

While this mischief was brewing, Spears went with Casey on 7 July to visit Churchill once more. Over the whisky and soda, Casey launched into a panegyric of Spears' work in the Levant:

He said that my work was the most trying and difficult imaginable and that day by day...I had to deal with the most exasperating claims of the French, all well calculated to impair our war effort. If we had any prestige left in the Levant it was, he said, only due to me.

After this remarkable statement, Churchill added that Spears was also "a great author" and asked Casey if he had read Spears' books. The author himself reiterated his favourite theme, that the Foreign Office was failing to give him proper support.

The proceedings of this admiration society were interrupted by the arrival of Massigli, who had been summoned to see Churchill (to the irritation of the Foreign Office) and found himself in the presence of a formidable anti-French triumvirate. In fact, Massigli was roughly handled, and had to endure Churchill's angry charge that "de Gaulle was pursuing his own interests rather than those of the Allies or even the real ones of France". The out-numbered Frenchman made no attempt to challenge this remarkable statement. The lecture continued as Churchill cited the Mokaddam case and warned that in future the British authorities would get a lot tougher. Unbending a little, Churchill reverted to

his thesis that we wanted nothing out of the war and certainly didn't want Syria but while we recognised French seniority in the Levant...France must give the same freedom that we were prepared to give [in Iraq, etc.] The P.M. repeated time and time again that we had no ambitions on Syria or any other French possession... 'There is no reason why a solution should not be found' said Winston time and time again and he said all these French misdemeanours against us must cease. 40

There was nothing new in all this sound and fury. It was the same old inadequate and contradictory formula, and Massigli might well have asked why, if the Levant was still a "French possession", the French had to accept British tutelage on major questions of independence or minor issues like the Mokaddam affair. But while nothing new was suggested, this meeting was significant as an instance of British policy in the Levant being handled by old cronies who did not bother to inform either the Foreign Office or the Cabinet.* It also reveals the continuing Spears-Churchill connection, now strengthened by the friendship of Casey, which was frustrating Foreign Office attempts to dismiss Spears or at least compel him to follow instructions in the normal fashion.

Tempers were wearing thin at the Foreign Office. "We are now reaping the reward of what we have sown in allowing Sir E. Spears to campaign for two years in favour of our replacing the French in the Levant", Peterson declared.⁴¹ "Spears is here on leave, intriguing and spreading poison", Harvey noted in his diary.⁴² These reactions were mild compared to the feelings aroused by Spears' memorandum on Anglo-French relations in the Levant, and above all by the way in which he had distributed this controversial paper outside the Foreign Office. As Harvey fumed:

The last straw was a minute [from Churchill] in praise of a report by Spears on Syria. This had been written at our request for internal consideration in the Office and Spears...sent it direct to the Prime Minister. The paper is in flat disagreement with our Syrian policy. [Eden] was so furious that I feared an explosion... 43

* Churchill himself kept no record of this meeting, and the Foreign Office was reduced to asking Spears if he could give an account of what passed. On 13 July Spears provided a brief account of the Massigli-Churchill encounter which was true to his own diary version. "We are entitled to know when representations of this force are made", minuted Hankey, Peterson's new subordinate. - FO371/35178/E4070.

The contents of Spears' paper were certainly explosive enough, and the Foreign Office was bound to view with alarm any dissemination of Spears' views. In an astonishing preamble on the future of both de Gaulle and metropolitan France, Spears declared that Britain's Arab interest precluded any Paris government established "under the aegis of French military power from North Africa". A Gaullist take-over would mean a Rightist, chauvinist, imperialist France, whereas "a popular form of government will not be imperialistic.... The Blum government was, I believe, anxious to give up the Syrian mandate". All this implied that de Gaulle would have to be broken, which could be done by a judicious blend of deliberate policy and favourable circumstances:

His participation in the Committee of National Liberation will tend in time to dim his glory, our disapproval voiced no doubt by discreet propaganda will create doubt as to his position, which fundamentally depends upon our backing, and contact between this megalomaniac and popular leaders must inevitably lead to a clash which will in time destroy him...*

Having dropped this bombshell, Spears introduced his views on the Levant with the obligatory platitude that Britain did not intend to supplant France in the Levant. What followed, however, was a strong case for doing just that, and Spears concluded by saying that any French refusal to toe the line should be countered by the imposition of British military government. En route to this conclusion, Spears claimed that Britain had continuing interests in the Levant, apart from the political one of demonstrating good faith to the skeptical Arab world. He went on to give a compelling picture of French corruption, misrule and double-dealing, for which the unlucky British were getting the blame: "The Syrians cannot understand why, having the power to do so, we should not insist that the French keep

* For reasons best known to himself, the Official Historian, in his summary of Spears' memorandum, completely omits this preamble, although nothing is more relevant to the Foreign Office view that Spears was obsessed with the idea of smashing de Gaulle and painting all the Eastern Mediterranean red. - Woodward, iv.260f.

their promises". The local conclusion was that these unsavoury oppressors were "our protégés whose actions we condone even if we do not approve them". Thus, since the Free French were only there "because we conquered the country and established them", it was time for Britain to call the tune in the Levant. Free France should be told to speed up the process of independence, accept British co-operation in the economy, and recognise the supreme directives of the British military authorities. Failure to accept these points should be met by a withdrawal of the "derived" power of the Free French administration in favour of a British military government of occupation.⁴⁴

As Spears had hoped, all this made a strong impression upon Churchill, who was in a thoroughly anti-Gaullist frame of mind. "This is a very powerful and able paper", he told Eden. "I had no idea the French were behaving so tyrannically". With that, the Prime Minister asked Eden to circulate Spears' paper to the War Cabinet, pending a Cabinet meeting on the subject which Casey should attend.⁴⁵ This was the last thing that Eden wanted. Churchill was already being "unbelievably tiresome" about de Gaulle, and this paper threatened to precipitate a repudiation of Free France as well as a disguised takeover of the Levant.⁴⁶ It was, perhaps, the closest Spears ever came to toppling de Gaulle and achieving an Arabist dream in one decisive blow.

The Foreign Office, scandalised by Spears' piratical ideas and methods, was even more alarmed by the Prime Minister's response, and, while Spears' paper was held back, a strong retort was prepared which described it as defective and invalid as a contribution to foreign policy. This reply argued that Britain had no future interests in the Levant, beyond the immediate independence question, and ridiculed Spears' peripheral approach to the question of future Anglo-French policy. It then proceeded to a number of particular points, such as French suspicions that Britain sought equal status or partnership in the Levant - the sort of thing that Spears was

advocating - and warned that "many British officers and officials in the Middle East wish to see the French leave the Levant States altogether, although this is contrary to the policy of His Majesty's Government". Spears himself belonged in this Arabist category, of course, and Churchill knew it. Eden was aware of that.⁴⁷

Armed with this lengthy rebuttal, Eden sent it to Churchill and offered to unravel the whole question with Casey, Spears and Massigli rather than trouble the War Cabinet with two such papers and a marathon debate. These were shrewd tactics and, with a few bellicose qualifications, Churchill agreed:

I am quite clear that we are being knocked about unduly and unfairly by the French...in Syria. I should like to feel that our officers there will be supported against insolent ill-usage... and that our Commander-in-Chief will not have to make ignominious compromises when he has overwhelming force at his disposal.

"Moreover", Churchill concluded, as if this were something new,

I consider that the French position in Syria must henceforward be on the same footing as our position in Iraq, and that our pledges to the Syrians and Lebanese are serious and must be made good. 48

There they were again, the fundamental contradictions of British policy in the Levant, repeated like some incantation.

The complete inadequacy of these platitudes had still not dawned on the Prime Minister. How could the Free French position conform to that of the British in Iraq when no-one in the Levant wanted to conclude the necessary treaty, and no constitutional French authority (except Vichy!) existed to sign in the name of France? The same sort of contradictions governed Churchill's own behaviour during this summer of 1943. If Free France was truly recognised as the pre-eminent European authority in the Levant, on what grounds could Churchill reproach Massigli when some French stooge in Tripoli violated British notions of fair play? After all, there were plenty of dubious characters in Baghdad or Cairo. Most absurd of all was

Churchill's hint that, due to his "overwhelming" military strength in the area, the British Commander could simply overrule French wishes in such matters. (Holmes had agreed that Mokaddam be allowed to stand for election, albeit under heavy surveillance). This kind of ham-fisted compulsion could only make nonsense of French pre-eminence and wreck any chance of satisfactory Anglo-Free French collaboration.

Still, Eden had managed to halt Churchill's latest blunderings into the Levantine labyrinth, and was labouring to bring the issues back onto the level of sober diplomacy. On 14 July Eden had "a very frank discussion" with Massigli, Casey and Spears.⁴⁹ This meeting went over a lot of old ground, although Massigli claimed that some of the complaints made by Casey and Spears were new to him. Nothing was settled, much was postponed, and Casey's chief complaint, that the Free French persistently failed to appreciate the needs of military security, was met with the standard response that the British put forward all kinds of things under that heading, which the French considered as part of the political sphere.⁵⁰

The last feature of this London interlude was an attempt by the Foreign Office to put a tighter rein on Spears by means of new standing instructions. Peterson was frankly skeptical about this:

the leopard cannot change his spots and I have very little confidence in Sir E. Spears' 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 turning the French out of the Levant. But it is no more than lip service... 51

But there was not much more that the Foreign Office could do. In the person of Spears it had a maverick who flatly disagreed with London's policy on the Levant and the whole Free French movement, and was hardly a representative in the required sense. Yet Spears had the personal support of the Prime Minister, who seemed to be equally obsessed with British prestige, and dismissed French complaints about Spears as the Gaullists' normal response whenever an Englishman stood up to them.

Eden's revised instructions reaffirmed, with heavy hint, that it was not Britain's policy to lever France out of the Levant. The main political concern was that the promise of independence "should gradually be fulfilled", and although no treaty could be finalised until the end of the war, "we should welcome the eventual conclusion of a treaty between France and the two States which would bring the French position...into line with that which we ourselves hold in Iraq". (Neither Spears nor the local nationalists welcomed such a treaty). As for any British intervention, it could only be justified "for reasons of military security" which Casey and the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, considered essential, or "to ensure that no action is taken which would imply that the pledges of independence are not to be fulfilled". Any British demands, Eden stressed, were to be based on the Lyttelton-de Gaulle agreements and not on the heresy that French powers were derived from the British occupation. France's position rested upon the mandate, and Spears' views on this matter were not to be advanced or repeated.⁵² Eden then drifted off into the customary contradictions, instructing Spears to maintain "a close concern" in all current events, but to do everything possible to allay French suspicions of British meddling.

* * * * *

Back in the Lebanon, the political scene was one of confusion and even menace, thanks to Tabet, who had attempted a blatant piece of jerrymandering. Catroux's abolition of nominated deputies had reduced the number of seats in the new Chamber from 63 to 42. Of these, 22 were allotted to Christians and 20 to Muslims. Tabet decided to raise the total number to 54 seats, but in the process he allocated another ten to Christians. This 32/22 deal upset the Islamic communities and raised the spectre of ethnic and religious conflict. The Muslim candidates threatened to boycott the elections, and even to agitate for the re-absorption of the Lebanon into Syria.

Catroux himself, during another brief visit, attempted to defuse the issue and to withdraw most of Tabet's powers, but Christian lobbying prevented any quick solution. On 20 July, however, Helleu took the plunge and decreed the dismissal of Tabet. A few days later, Spears returned and supported the Frenchman. He also used his rapport with the Lebanese to arrange a compromise solution, and the Christian/Muslim ratio was fixed at 30/25. On 5 August it was announced that the Lebanese elections, which Tabet had postponed until September, would be held on 29 August.⁵³

By this time it was all over in Syria, where the nationalists had won an overwhelming victory. Their leader, Shukri Quwatli, became the new President of Syria. At the beginning of August, the Lebanon buzzed with the news of this anti-French triumph, and electoral fever redoubled as the polling day drew near. On 25 August Casey told Churchill that the outcome in Syria was largely due

to Spears' efforts to achieve fair and free polling. A Government has been formed that will not lie down under French domination....in the Lebanon [the] French are doing everything possible to rig the elections and so ensure a French-dominated Government. The state of mind of the newly-formed Syrian Government is definitely set against a treaty with the French and if a really representative Government were to be achieved in the Lebanon they would take the same attitude. 54

By 29 August tension was acute in the Lebanon, but on the whole good order prevailed. "The Lebanese elections passed off in comparative calm", Coghill noted dryly: "only four gunshot wounds".⁵⁵ The outcome was an unpleasant shock for the French - another nationalist victory, and proof that French influence and sectarian propaganda had failed. The further delay in the Lebanese elections had upset French calculations, for the result in Syria had a dramatic effect on opinion in the Lebanon. A strong nationalist consciousness had emerged, surmounting ethnic divisions. The new President, Bechara el Khoury, was a Christian; the Prime Minister, Riad Solh, a Muslim; and the six-man Cabinet represented six different versions of Christianity

or Islam: yet all were united in their desire to eject the French.⁵⁶

This result was greeted by an elemental outburst of national feeling throughout the Lebanon, and the new government found itself borne along on a wave of popular enthusiasm. This enabled Riad Solh to present the nationalist objectives as the unmistakable and irresistible will of the people. In these circumstances there was bound to be a head-on collision with the Free French, who were struggling to maintain their mandate until a satisfactory treaty could be signed. The fact that the Gaullists could not yet sign any treaty in the name of France rendered their position still more embarrassing in the autumn of 1943. The Levantines knew it, and they knew that their position could never be stronger. For the moment the French were few and feeble. Catroux had made de-colonising noises in desperation, and the British had publicly guaranteed these independence pledges. The time had come to assert this independence unequivocally, before the French could re-appear in any force and British protection faded away.

After mutual consultations, the Syrians and Lebanese made their bid through the initiative of Riad Solh. At the opening of the new Chamber on 7 October, the Lebanese leader declared his intention to abolish the mandate by eliminating from the Constitution and laws all provisions for outsiders to interfere in the affairs of the Lebanon. These, he said, were incompatible with national sovereignty, and added that the French language would cease to rank with Arabic as the official language of the Lebanon. The Chamber and the streets echoed with loud support and enthusiasm for this bold declaration.

For Free France this could only mean surrender or retaliation, unless the Lebanese could be persuaded to accept some sort of compromise. It was soon evident that they could not. On 12 October Helleu tried to tell Khoury that Riad Solh's demands could not be conceded unless the Lebanese signed a treaty with the French National

Committee.* But Helleu was roundly told, with reference to 1936, that the Levant States had no confidence in French Government treaties, let alone those offered by Frenchmen who did not constitute a government!

The hitherto pliable Lebanese now seemed to be spoiling for a fight, and after this verbal blow Helleu resorted to the written word, informing the President on 21 October that the mandate still stood and that Riad Solh's proposals were unacceptable. Nevertheless the French were prepared to discuss a more gradual path to independence. The reply came that the Chamber would not be fobbed off with these dilutions, and that the mandate was now inadmissible, given the French proclamations of independence in 1941 and the de facto recognition granted to the new republics by most of the League of Nations states.⁵⁷ After this riposte, Helleu withdrew to Algiers for urgent consultations, while Casey sent another of his pro-Spears bulletins to Churchill:

The French are now showing signs of reacting to the blow which their prestige has suffered as a result of the elections [and] it is unlikely that de Gaulle will allow matters to rest. Spears has done a fine piece of work in countering French efforts to rig the elections, especially in the Lebanon, but they are angry and I foresee trouble ahead. 58

After talks with de Gaulle, Catroux and Massigli on 5 November, Helleu started back for the Lebanon. On the 8th, hearing that the Chamber was about to debate the amendments to the Constitution, Helleu sent a desperate message from Cairo, stating that he was carrying new proposals[†] and requesting an adjournment of the fateful debate. This was rejected and the Chamber gave overwhelming support to the repudiation of the mandate.

* De Gaulle's movement had now evolved into the broader French Committee of National Liberation, based at Algiers. Already in firm command, de Gaulle became its sole titular President in November.

+ There was nothing very new about them. He was offering to negotiate the transfer of such matters as finance and police, and to resurrect the 1936 treaty.

Helleu and his advisers were infuriated by this defiant act, and rumours of an ugly backlash began to circulate. Lebanese Ministers, who had earlier been invited to Armistice ceremonies on 11 November, were curtly advised not to come. A British Intelligence report stated that the French were loading bombs onto a borrowed Blenheim. Rumour begat rumour. On the 10th, a Lebanese Minister told Spears that Helleu would broadcast that evening that the Chamber was dissolved and the Government dismissed. Spears telephoned Casey and was instructed to tell Helleu that the British did not believe this rumour and relied on the French to do nothing rash. It was then ascertained that Helleu did intend to make some broadcast soon. The worried Spears, who was giving a dinner that evening, decided to have a private talk with Helleu afterwards to reassure himself that there was no truth in these alarming rumours. Even Spears, apparently, still attached some value to the word of a Frenchman - and an ex-Vichy diplomat, at that.⁵⁹

NOTES

- 1 F0371/31479/E7507, E7508; F0371/35174/E27; Spears tel., 10 January 1943, F0371/35174/E220.
- 2 Peterson minute, 9 January 1943, F0371/35174/E273.
- 3 Peterson note, 12 January 1943, Ibid.
- 4 Spears tel., 23 January 1943, F0371/35174/E511.
- 5 Catroux, pp.318-330.
- 6 Casey tel., 19 February 1943 and Spears reply, 20 February 1943, F0371/35175/E1048, E1070.
- 7 Spears tel., 21 February 1943, F0371/35175/E1082.
- 8 Eyres and Caccia minutes, 22 February 1943, Ibid.
- 9 Beirut Legation Weekly Political Summary No.51, 24 March 1943, F0371/35176/E1774.
- 10 Spears tel., 19 March 1943 and Catroux's Lebanese proclamation, F0371/35176/E1602; Spears tel., 20 March 1943, F0371/35176/E1625; Spears tels., 23 and 24 March 1943, F0371/35176/E1717, E1730; Catroux's Syrian proclamation, F0371/35176/E2151.
- 11 Beirut Legation Weekly Political Summary No.51, 24 March 1943, F0371/35176/E1774.
- 12 Spears tel., 19 March 1943, F0371/35176/E1602.
- 13 Translation of Spears broadcast in F0371/35176/E2234.
- 14 Foreign Office minute, 29 August 1943, F0371/35180/E5126.
- 15. Spears tel., 18 March 1943, F0371/35176/E1585.
- 16 Furlonge interview, 17 May 1978.
- 17 Minutes of a meeting on Syria, 22 December 1942, CAB 95/8.
- 18 Harvey Diary, 16 October, 1942.
- 19 Spears tel., 14 February 1943, F0371/35175/E1001.
- 20 Caccia minute, 15 February 1943, Ibid.
- 21 Cadogan minute, 15 February 1943, Ibid.
- 22 Spears memoir, 2 February 1943, SPRS II/7.
- 23 Casey note, 8 March 1943, F0371/35177/E2488.
- 24 Spears paper, 14 February 1943, enclosed in Casey despatch of 8 March 1943, F0371/35177/E2488.
- 25 Sir M. Peterson minute, 19 March 1943, F0371/35177/E2488.

- 26 Eden letter, 21 April 1943, F0371/35177/E2346.
- 27 Caccia letter, 21 April 1943, F0371/35176/E2284.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Spears Diary, 17 April 1943.
- 30 Beirut Legation, "Review of the Year 1943 in the Lebanon", SPRS III/4.
- 31 Beirut Legation, Weekly Political Summary No.56, 5 May 1943, F0371/35177/E2642.
- 32 Beirut Legation, "Review", SPRS III/4.
- 33 Pearse, p.42f.
- 34 F0371/35210/E3800.
- 35 Peterson minute, 11 May 1943, F0371/35177/E2759.
- 36 Coghill Diary, p.31.
- 37 Spears Diary, 25 June 1943.
- 38 Spears Diary, 26-27 June, 1943 and Spears memoir, 27 June 1943, in SPRS II/7.
- 39 Spears Diary, 29 June 1943.
- 40 Spears Diary, 7 July 1943.
- 41 Peterson note, 5 July 1943, F0371/35178/E3899.
- 42 Harvey Diary, 6 July 1943.
- 43 Harvey Diary, 13 July 1943.
- 44 Spears, "Memorandum on Anglo-French Relations in Syria and the Lebanon", 5 July 1943, F0371/35178/E3893. (*Italics mine*).
- 45 Churchill minute, 12 July 1943, F0371/35178/E3893.
- 46 Harvey Diary, 6, 13 July 1943.
- 47 Eden memorandum, "Anglo-French Relations in Syria and the Lebanon", 13 July 1943, F0371/35178/E3893.
- 48 Churchill minute, 15 July 1943, F0371/35178/E3893.
- 49 Eden minute, 16 July 1943, F0371/35178/E3893.
- 50 F0371/35180/E4423.

- 51 Peterson minute, F0371/35213/E4229.
 - 52 Eden's revised instructions to Spears, and Eden's attached letter, 27 July 1943, F0371/35123/E4229.
 - 53 Spears tel., 28 January 1943 (on the nature of the Lebanese Chamber), F0371/35174/E631; Hankey minute, 5 July 1943, F0371/35178/E3899; Beirut Legation, "Review", SPRS III/4.
 - 54 Casey tel., 25 August 1943, PREM 3 305/10.
 - 55 Coghill Diary, p.31.
 - 56 Beirut Legation, "Review", SPRS III/4.
 - 57 Ibid.; Woodward, iv.268ff; Spears, Fulfilment, p.222f.
 - 58 Casey tel., 27 October 1943, PREM 3 305/10.
 - 59 Beirut Legation, "Review", SPRS III/4; Spears, Fulfilment, p.224f; Spears tel.(636), 10 November 1943, SPRS III/3.
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the world-to-be intoxicated us.... yet when we achieved and the new world dawned, the old men came out again and took our victory.

T.E.Lawrence*

I had never supposed that the French would do anything so abysmally foolish...

Casey[†]

On the evening of 10 November, after a polite dinner, Spears had his private talk with Helleu. Mentioning some of the alarming rumours which were circulating, Spears asked for an assurance that nothing was amiss. Stressing the great popular support which Riad Solh enjoyed, Spears asked the Delegate-General[‡] to remember that they were allies in a theatre which could not afford serious unrest or disorder. Helleu, looking "the very picture of shocked deprecation", replied that he was fully conscious of the need to maintain good order:

'I give you my word of honour - je vous donne ma parole d'honneur', he said, 'that the French will not only not encourage any disturbances, but will discourage any such movement'. Then...he jumped up and said once more, 'I give you my word of honour, there will be no disturbances'.

Relieved and deceived by this response, Spears thanked Helleu and apologised for having raised the question. These were, he explained, difficult and dangerous times.¹

When the blow fell a few hours later, Spears was fast asleep. He was alerted by the sudden arrival of Khoury's terrified son, who reported that soldiers had burst into the Presidential house and arrested his father. Spears soon learned that Riad Solh and most of his Cabinet had also been dragged from their beds and spirited away into captivity by the French. These Gestapo tactics were apparently Helleu's idea of discouragement. As Spears informed London:

* Seven Pillars of Wisdom (1926), p.22.

+ Personal Experience 1939-1946 (1962), p.147f.

‡ Catroux had finally relinquished this title, and was now de Gaulle's Commissioner for Islamic Affairs in Algiers.

This morning at 4 a.m. the President and all members of the Cabinet [who could] be found were arrested by Surêté agents accompanied by French Marines and Senegalese.

At 8 am, in a terse radio message, Helleu announced a decree dissolving the Lebanese Chamber, suspending the Constitution and dismissing the Riad Solh government. In its place, Helleu installed the pro-French Emile Eddé, Khoury's most bitter rival, as Head of State. Many newspapers were suppressed, a curfew was announced, and French patrols took to the streets, menacing and ill-disciplined.²

Spears was "right up on his hind legs". At 7 am he had telephoned the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, demanding an immediate armed intervention by British forces. But the Cairo command was now held by his old bête noire, Jumbo Wilson, who was not the man to be hustled into anything so hasty and unauthorised. He "proposed to do nothing beyond moving some armour up to the Lebanese frontier".³ Undeterred, Spears telephoned Casey and called for the imposition of British martial law, but the Minister of State refused this request and instructed Spears to confine his reaction to a stiff letter of protest, to be delivered to Helleu in Casey's name.⁴

Spears' reaction could be described as typical and his attitude was no doubt intensified by the feeling that Helleu had pulled the wool over his eyes. It was now painfully obvious to Spears that Helleu, on being questioned point-blank within hours of the planned coup, had deliberately misled him. In the formal letter of protest that day, Spears did not fail to condemn Helleu for proving in a matter of hours that his word of honour was worthless.⁵ It was also true that Spears was concerned for the safety of the kidnapped Lebanese Ministers, who had been taken to Rachaya, near the mountainous Syrian border.

And yet, beneath all the righteous indignation, it would seem that Spears' emotional reaction also reflected another anxiety. This was the possibility that the Lebanese leaders might be compelled to explain why, in the past weeks, they had suddenly adopted such provocative measures and precipitated a confrontation with the French. Such an explanation would, of course, bring out the obvious

point that the Syrian and Lebanese nationalists were acting in concert, and had decided to repudiate the mandate while Free France was weak and pre-occupied. But it might also reveal precisely what role Spears had played in the whole affair, and the French might even obtain some dramatic confessions implicating Spears or at least revealing that his conduct had been unacceptable.

Coghill, Britain's security chief in Beirut, was convinced that Spears had made the most mischievous use of his position. In September 1943, Spears seemed determined to "encourage the [new] Governments to ask for the earth and moon". Then, of the November crisis itself, Coghill wrote:

What a month of bloody wars....The Lebanese Government doubtless backed by Spears [who had] orders from the Foreign Office earlier telling him to try and dissuade the Lebanese Government from taking this action. He had at least two days and boasts that Riad Solh the Prime Minister did nothing without his advice....I consider Spears at least 75% responsible for all the trouble... 6

If this was so, then Spears certainly had reason to be anxious about the mettle of the detailed Lebanese leaders.

There can be little doubt that Spears did support the Lebanese in the precipitation of the crisis. In his diary account of his departure from the Levant in December 1944, Spears spoke with some emotion of the great affection shown to him by the Lebanese, and fondly recalled that "None of the Lebanese gave me away when they were imprisoned in Rachaya".⁷ This helps to explain why the traditionally less-than-forthright Lebanese suddenly became such fearless men of principle, adopting a public stance from which they could not possibly retreat without destroying themselves politically. Their action, which was neither prudent nor in the normal pattern of Lebanese political behaviour, was based on the belief that it was the Free French who would have to back down.

It was Spears, above all, who encouraged them in this belief and no doubt emphasised that both he and Casey fully supported the

view that the mandate was no longer admissable. This left the Foreign Office isolated and remote in its support for the continuing validity of the French mandate. And since its own representative in Beirut failed to give a fair account of London's views on the mandate, these views had no local impact. Instead, Spears stressed the converse aspect of British policy - the commitment to Levant independence - in a one-sided fashion. Ever since March 1942 Spears had played this game, stressing independence in such an absolute and literal way that the very mention of the mandate became an irreconcilable contradiction. In this sense, November 1943 was his masterstroke, for this time the Lebanese had said it, and in such a well-publicised way that London could not afford to disavow them without arousing the entire Arab world.

However much Spears may have been motivated by his Arabist ideals and his contempt for the French colonial mentality, his ensuing attacks on the Free French for endangering public order and disrupting the local war effort can only be described as humbug. Spears himself had been the cause of some trouble and tension in the Levant, and he was clearly implicated in the recent Lebanese posturings which had stung the French into reaction. Anyone in Spears' position who was really as concerned as he now affected to be about tranquillity in the Levant would have made every effort to keep the lid on Levantine aspirations until the end of the war. However difficult that may have been, the fact remains that Spears lifted the lid right off and encouraged the inhabitants of this Pandora's box to pour forth and confound the thinly-stretched French. Yet Spears was not the man to let this muffle his eloquent condemnations of the wicked and irresponsible French. The fact that his own government had locked up plenty of politicians in the name of public order, in such places as India and Palestine, was also cheerfully ignored by Spears - if it occurred to him at all.

The dramatic events of 11 November set off a flurry of diplomatic activity, and various Middle Eastern capitals felt the

storm of protest which arose throughout the Arab world. The world press suddenly discovered the Lebanese situation, and a rash of half-baked reports appeared in response to the Almighty Deadline. Within hours of Helleu's coup, Casey had collected a planeload of assorted journalists and sent them on to Beirut, where their sheer persistence reminded Spears of a swarm of bees.⁸ But the newspaper reports were as nothing compared with the barrage of lengthy telegrams from the Foreign Office to its men in Algiers, Cairo, Beirut and elsewhere. Spears alone received and sent at least 360 wires in the next twenty days.⁹

There were other messages which were not seen by the Foreign Office, for the Spears-Casey team was on the warpath. From the very start of the crisis the Cairo Minister became a forceful and decisive figure, confounding the Foreign Office mandarin who had called him "a lightweight".¹⁰ As Lord Protector of Spears and the Levantines, Casey fired off another of his telegrams to Churchill on 11 November:

You will know of situation in Beirut.... The French have grossly overstepped the mark [but they] will attempt to saddle responsibility in obscure ways on us and probably on Spears in particular.... the emergence of strongly Nationalistic Governments at the recent relatively free elections (for which Spears was largely responsible) was the natural reaction after years of gross oppression and exploitation.... The criminally foolish thing that the French have now done has shocked opinion in the Middle East [and we] need all the pressure we can bring to bear on the French Committee of Liberation at Algiers... 11

At the same time Casey told the Foreign Office that "Helleu would only have acted as he has done on instructions from Algiers". It was therefore clear that "only Algiers can remedy the political situation in Beirut by instruction to Helleu". Casey called on the Foreign Office to exert every pressure on Algiers.¹²

It was certainly true that Algiers would have to undo the damage done by Helleu, but it is by no means certain that Helleu's

brutal stroke was carried out on de Gaulle's or the Committee's instructions. This assumption has often been made, but the only evidence is a telegram of support which de Gaulle sent to Helleu on the 13th, which Helleu proceeded to wave in front of a press conference. He told the journalists that "de Gaulle had been in full agreement with the measures taken", but this looks suspiciously like another of Helleu's calculated ambiguities.¹³ De Gaulle's view seems to have been that Helleu's backlash was understandable but that circumstances would not permit the French to get away with it.¹⁴

The action was clearly a blatant contradiction of Allied propaganda about freedom and democracy. Yet de Gaulle, ever mindful of French prestige and the host of humiliations he had suffered for France, could not bring himself to throw Helleu to the Anglo-Saxon wolves when that little man had come out fighting in the name of France. His message to Helleu was that

the forceful measures you saw fit to use were perhaps necessary. In any case, I must consider them as such since you used them. You are covered in that respect and we will not disavow you... 15

While this comes from de Gaulle's own volume of documents, it is unlikely that de Gaulle's "full agreement" amounted to anything more than this. It was quite enough to comfort the beleaguered Helleu, and although he flourished this wire at a press conference he did not offer to read it.

Beyond this, there is nothing but the purely circumstantial fact that, on being defied by the Lebanese, Helleu withdrew to Algiers, returned to Beirut, and authorised a brutally efficient round-up of the Lebanese ringleaders. It has thus been deduced that he acted on orders from Algiers. But the move which really seems to have unhinged Helleu - Riad Solh's repudiation of the mandate on 8 November, despite an urgent message from Helleu - occurred when the Delegate-General was in Cairo, on his way back.

There is reason to believe that it was not de Gaulle but the resentful clique of old Vichy colonialists in Beirut who planned the

backlash. This group, led by Boelen and Boegner, at the Délégation-Générale, had often been the subject of complaints by Spears and others for their dubious status as Allies. "This gang must be liquidated", Coghill had said of them in 1942, but nothing was done.¹⁶ It was this group which on 5 November had aggravated the Lebanese situation with the calculated publication of a communiqué, stating that the Free French could not accept any constitutional changes made without their prior consent. This broke an agreement between Helleu and the Lebanese that there should be no publicity during Helleu's absence. The Lebanese had angrily retorted by announcing their legal right to amend the Constitution, and arranged the fateful debate for 8 November.¹⁷ It would appear, then, that the old Vichyist clique, with their Bourbon mentality of learning and forgetting nothing, were seeking a showdown with the people they had despised and dominated since 1919. Their action on 5 November was enough to ensure that Helleu's last-minute request for a delay was flatly refused. This humiliation, in turn, persuaded Helleu to authorise the repressive measures of 10-11 November.

The whole reaction of arresting the Lebanese, publishing decrees, appointing a puppet Government and unleashing French troops - not to mention the cancelling of Ministerial invitations to the 11 November Armistice ceremony - must have been planned before Helleu arrived back in Beirut on the afternoon of the 10th. It is not clear whether Helleu simply agreed, in reaction to Riad Solh's humiliating snub, to unleash the backlash. But it does appear that responsibility for the coup must be attributed to the colonialist clique in Beirut, and to Helleu, not to de Gaulle. It is interesting that all these men went within three weeks, whereas de Gaulle had repeatedly refused to remove any of them in response to British complaints. Boelen, Boegner, and several others, i.e., the men who had actually released the 5 November communiqué, left the Levant altogether.¹⁸

By the 13th, while Helleu was uttering his self-justifications, the situation was becoming critical throughout the Lebanon. In Beirut, normal activities were at a standstill and Spears was besieged by delegations demanding British protection and military intervention. The inevitable confrontations with French troops became worse. On the 12th, Senegalese troops had roughly dispersed a large group of Lebanese women outside the American Legation, training their weapons on the First Secretary when he came out to remonstrate. On the 13th, tensions boiled over into several bloody incidents. Outside the British Legation in Beirut, a body of students was fired on by French Marines. In Tripoli and Sidon, open season was declared on any public gatherings, as French troops fired on demonstrators or simply mowed them down with their vehicles. In all, about twenty people were killed and another sixty wounded in these incidents. Spears began to report signs of a violent reaction, and was hard-pressed to persuade various armed groups to restrain themselves.¹⁹

In the diplomatic sphere, too, tensions were proliferating. In Baghdad, the Iraqi Prime Minister had already told Cornwallis that it would henceforth be "impossible for French and Lebanese to live in harmony" and that "this was a grand opportunity for [Britain] to oust [the French] from Levant". The Iraqis were becoming restless. On the 13th, a lively debate in the Iraqi Chamber became anti-British as most speakers stressed that the Free French position had been established by British arms and money. Some even described the French as "British mercenaries" and there were demands for an armed Iraqi intervention to forcibly expel the Gaullists. Similar noises were made by the Egyptians, and these developments brought a hasty response from the Foreign Office. Cornwallis and Lampson were asked to stress

that we stand by promises of final independence given to Levant States and intend to see them carried out.... Nothing can damage Arab aspirations more than disorders at the present juncture of the war.

This was debatable, but it was certainly true that uproar in the Arab world at that time would have been acutely embarrassing and

inconvenient for the British.²⁰

Such a spectre undoubtedly contributed to the force with which London approached the French Committee in Algiers. On the 12th, London requested the immediate recall of Helleu and the release of the Lebanese Ministers. In the temporary absence of Harold MacMillan, these demands were put to de Gaulle and Massigli by Roger Makins.* A "rather subdued" de Gaulle began by stating that Helleu had been forced to exercise French mandatory rights in the face of provocation. Makins replied that the French reaction had been out of all proportion to any provocation. He then presented London's demands. This drew from de Gaulle a curious threat to withdraw every Frenchman from the Levant forthwith, whilst publishing his "case" to the world. This gigantic bluff was presumably based upon the calculation that the British would then be forced to occupy the Levantine vacuum to keep order, thus incurring the charge that they had levered the French out despite all their claims to innocence. Eventually, after countering complaints about Helleu with complaints about Spears, de Gaulle revealed that Catroux was being sent to Beirut "with appropriate instructions" and would visit Casey en route.²¹

On the 13th MacMillan returned to Algiers and found that his American counterpart, Murphy, was about to deliver a protest to Massigli. It was therefore arranged that MacMillan and Makins should see Massigli immediately after Murphy's protest. The unlucky Massigli, who attempted to tell MacMillan that "complete calm" reigned in the Levant, was bluntly asked for a reply to Britain's demands. He claimed that Catroux's mission effectively suspended Helleu and that the question of the imprisoned Lebanese would be dealt with by Catroux in Beirut.²²

London's attitude to the Free French did not mean that there was unqualified support for the Lebanese. The Foreign Office had sent another wire to MacMillan which provided some background to the crisis, and attempted to give a balanced view of the whole affair. "Present situation in Lebanon has been brought about by

* MacMillan was the Minister Resident at Allied Headquarters in North Africa.

grave blunders and lack of judgment on both sides", London argued. The Lebanese, whose elections had been held as a result of British efforts, had "attempted to take the bit between their teeth". Fortified by undue British support (a clear reference to Spears), the ungrateful Lebanese had embarked on a collision course with the French without the courtesy of consulting London. For their part, the French had "behaved even more foolishly" by their grudging attitude towards the gradual process of independence to which they were publicly committed. Catroux's 1941 declarations had retained sufficient bargaining counters to make this reluctance unnecessary. Now, their "violent attitude towards the Lebanese Government" 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".

This may have been condescending, but it was by no means an apologia for the French. Nevertheless it provoked a vigorous retort from Beirut, where Spears detected the work of his old adversary, Peterson, and completely lost his temper. "Counsellor", he scribbled across this wire in his red ink, "please draft adequate reply... It should be of a nature to finish off Peterson once and for all".²³ Lascelles rose to the occasion in the best Spears tradition and expressed all the pent-up frustration and anger within the Beirut Legation:

It is depressing to find that attempts are still being made...to whitewash the French and to insinuate that the Lebanese are nearly as much to blame... Lebanese are well aware that they owe [elections] to HM Government alone. They were duly grateful to us for this first sign of implementation of categorical assurances...made to them nearly two years ago, Having acquired a fully constitutional Parliament...they made the "grave blunder" (your words) of assuming that... they were entitled to change their own laws as they thought fit.

You have perhaps forgotten that [in 1941 Catroux stated that they] might immediately adopt any constitution they chose. The Lebanese Government, having no experience of international affairs, were childish enough to suppose that these solemn and public promises meant what they said.

Moreover, the retort continued, the Lebanese had given plenty of notice of their intentions in Riad Solh's speech on 7 October. The French had reacted with veiled threats and references to a mandate which, "though still technically in existence, we were all agreed it was an indecency to assert in practice". The French response was to abduct the Lebanese leaders "at dead of night" and unleash "hordes of French, native and black troops on an unarmed population which, though justifiably incensed...has only now begun to show positive signs of getting...out of hand".²⁴

This certainly showed where Spears and his colleagues stood, but it cleverly ignored the fact that London itself had winked at the dilution of Catroux's extravagant proclamation of June 1941, and it twisted London's guideline that public references to the mandate were to be avoided. It was the Lebanese initiative which forced the French to emphasise the mandate in the autumn of 1943, against the great tide of popular opinion. It was largely because the French mandate was such a vulnerable target that the initiative was taken.

More pro-Lebanese pressure, of a less-impeachable sort, came in from Casey, who visited Beirut on the 13th/14th - and undoubtedly heard all about Peterson's "wet" telegram. After discussions with Spears and Holmes, Casey conducted his own fact-finding tour of Beirut, and discussed the situation with key figures in the Islamic and Christian communities. He was impressed to find that the most heated anti-French sentiments came from the Maronite Archbishop, who affirmed his solidarity with Muslim leaders and said that if the British let them down "they would take the business into their own hands". Even the President of the American University expressed the view that "a spark might set the whole country alight" and that if the situation was not rapidly restored by Catroux, the Lebanese and Syrians would rise and "destroy" the French "with great bloodshed". From these interviews, Casey reported the general conclusion that it was not some ill-advised

British encouragement which had caused the crisis, but rather a surfeit of French exploitation and cynicism "which had made even the Lebanese worm turn at long last".²⁵

In a further wire to London, Casey argued that in the light of this situation, no French procrastination could be tolerated. While he appreciated that the British demands in Algiers were a bitter pill which the French Committee might take some time to swallow, he did not believe that the Lebanese situation could be contained much longer. De Gaulle's refusal to disavow Helleu had inflated the question of French prestige, and Algiers would "play for time hoping that something will turn up to save their face. Catroux's mission... is, I strongly suspect, playing for time". That was the rub:

if French are out to play for time, we for our part cannot afford to let them do so.... Population has hitherto been largely held in check by hopes of British intervention. If that hope is too long deferred, this check will be removed...

The result, Casey hinted, would be an onslaught by armed mountain peoples, including the formidable Druzes, inspired by the joyful prospect of revenge and plunder. Unless the French had met British demands by the 17th, or unless the British took over the patrolling of the larger towns by that date, the situation could get "irrevocably out of hand". The Minister of State therefore told London that Algiers should be given this deadline forthwith. Since it was five days from the original presentation of the demands, it was "a not unreasonable time-limit".²⁶

In the meantime, London had also mentioned a sort of time-limit, but it was allowed to lapse. On the 13th, the Foreign Office had told Makins that the French response to his message was "evasive" and that it was only by stretching forbearance to the limit that they were prepared to await Catroux's arrival in Beirut, provided it was no later than the 15th. This message was repeated to Casey in Cairo, but that worthy was in Beirut, telegraphing his own time-limit to London.²⁷ From Algiers, MacMillan reported that he had

seen Catroux, who was leaving early on the 14th, and had said "with a smile, that there are other ways of dealing with Governments than putting them in prison". On that typical note, Catroux began his slow progress to Beirut. MacMillan made no mention of London's stipulation that Catroux should be in Beirut by the 15th, and that arch-procrastinator had already delayed his departure from Algiers.²⁸ So much for London's first time-limit.

In London, the Foreign Office did not care for Casey's specific requests. It thought that British intervention could not be confined to limited patrols in the larger towns, and that French rejection of the demands would require a stiff response: public dissociation from the Gaullists and the imposition of martial law in the Levant. But this was a last resort, and meanwhile the French should be given a little longer to comply. On the 15th, Cadogan conveyed these views to the War Cabinet and secured its agreement. Casey was duly informed.²⁹

Meanwhile, the incorrigible Catroux was approaching his mission at a glacial rate. Arriving in Cairo on the afternoon of the 14th, he cancelled a 6 pm appointment with Casey, pleading a sudden fever. On the 15th he called on Casey and "ploughed over a lot of old ground". This exercise, though Casey did not say so to the Foreign Office, included the charge that Spears had blatantly collaborated with the Lebanese nationalists, and was in fact at the bottom of the whole crisis. The solution therefore lay in the simultaneous removal of Spears and Helleu. Casey denied all this and retorted that French grievances did not begin to justify what Helleu had done. Pursuing this theme, the Australian urged Catroux to hurry to Beirut and effect the release of the Lebanese Ministers before the situation became unmanageable, but Catroux was in no hurry. Casey declared that any further delay "would make the most unfortunate possible impression", but this only allowed Catroux to cloud the issue. "He said he could not accept an ultimatum...to leave Cairo

at once". The game proceeded, with Casey labouring the urgency of the situation and the acceptance of British demands, and Catroux putting up a smokescreen of personality and protocol. Invoking "his past record" - a useful device, since Casey's views on that score could have started a whole new quarrel - Catroux claimed that he was entitled to be left to settle the crisis in his own way.

Later in the day, and again on the morning of the 16th, Catroux returned to the office of the exasperated Casey. In a confiding tone, Catroux said that

If Helleu was recalled and Lebanese Government restored, it would be regarded as a straight... capitulation to Britain with complete loss of face to France. There were things that could be done and things that could not be done...

Faced with this unacceptable thought, Catroux said that he might be "obliged to recommend that France withdraw entirely from the Levant". This Gaullist suggestion and Catroux's personal dilemma caused Casey no visible distress.³⁰

While Catroux lingered in Cairo, Spears was rapidly losing what patience he still had in Beirut. On the 15th, Spears' car had been stopped in the street while a French officer waved a loaded revolver in his face. Spears himself promptly assisted an English corporal to overpower the Frenchman. Gleefully relating this to London, Spears pointed out that this menacing behaviour was now standard practice in the streets of Beirut. He also reported that the French were proposing to send a military detachment into the mountains to arrest the two Lebanese Ministers who had escaped the original round-up. He had restrained the French on the grounds that once an engagement began, nothing could stop the whole country from rising. Finally, Spears told London that Catroux's time-limit had expired, a remark which was as true as it was unwelcome. He opined that there would be "serious trouble" unless Catroux released the Lebanese "unconditionally" within a few hours of his arrival.

Catroux's slow progress to Beirut made the 16th another lost day. Casey's predictions about "playing for time" were clearly accurate, and Catroux made no move to release the imprisoned Lebanese. The general strike continued, the shops remained shuttered - evidence, as Spears remarked, of genuine feelings in the commercial climate of Beirut.³¹ Only the swarm of journalists seemed as industrious as ever. Most of them, well-briefed and looked after by Spears' staff, filed routine reports stressing the plight of the Lebanese and the repressive measures of the French. A few went behind the scenes. Walter Lippmann suggested that Spears, "Churchill's personal appointee", was up to no good. The Daily Telegraph correspondent, detecting the Spears-Holmes breach, quoted the local French Commander: "My dear friend General Holmes completely agrees with me...that if the French and Lebanese are left alone...everything will work out satisfactorily". Holmes was certainly busy disavowing Spears. He was in friendly communication with Catroux* and when Gerald Norman, the Times correspondent, arrived in Beirut, he was taken to Holmes' headquarters. There Holmes told him that he saw no justification for British martial law, since there was "no evidence" that the French were unable to maintain order. This was a most curious statement, but the unlucky Norman was unable to get such sensitive material past the British censorship.³²

On the 17th, London had still heard nothing from or about Catroux, and Eden finally decided to impose a time-limit. This one was officially blessed by the War Cabinet, and Casey was alerted:

If...General Catroux has not by the evening of... 18th November, given some definite indication that French are on the point of complying with our demands...you should fly to Beirut on the following day...and inform General Catroux personally that failing compliance with these demands by 10 am on [21st] you are instructed... to arrange for an immediate declaration of British martial law...

You should make it plain that in that case imprisoned Ministers are to be released...

* On his return to Algiers, Catroux saw MacMillan and "spoke highly of General Holmes' behaviour" - MacMillan tel., 1 December 1943, SPRS III.

You should also emphasise that this declaration of martial law is taken on the grounds of military necessity [and] has no political implications... 33

But what were London's precise demands? In a subsequent wire, Casey was told that "we are not insisting on immediate re-establishment of old Government", and that there was a distinction between the release and the reinstatement of the Lebanese.³⁴ Casey took a dim view of this casuistry, and he immediately challenged the Foreign Office:

I have assumed throughout that release of Ministers meant their release as Ministers, i.e., that reinstatement of Ministers was corollary of their release.... I feel quite sure that Catroux interprets our demand [that way]. I consistently spoke to him in this sense here. If their release is as private individuals only then (1) What is the position...of the President..? (2) Who constitutes the Government of the Lebanon..?

Casey went on to say that such a shabby arrangement would mean that Britain condoned Helleu's actions, and it would suggest that if the Lebanese leaders did not "come to heel" they would be replaced. Casey then played his trump card: "I had a telegram from the Prime Minister today in which he asks me amongst other things... "Have the Lebanese President and Ministers been released and reinstated"?³⁵

The concept of the release of Ministers was certainly ambiguous, but as Casey bluntly pointed out, their release as private persons would amount to British acceptance of Helleu's actions and Eddé's spurious authority in the Lebanon. This would have put London in an absurd position. Casey himself held that release as Ministers was the implicit meaning of London's demand, and it seems that he made this clear enough to Catroux, for the latter had promptly complained that if the Lebanese Government was "restored", France would lose face.³⁶

Casey's use of Churchill's views may have upset the Foreign Office, but it was certainly well-timed and effective. So far in this

crisis, Eden and his subordinates had enjoyed a rare immunity from the usual Churchillian interventions, for the Prime Minister had sailed from Plymouth on 12 November - bound for conferences at Cairo and Teheran. Now, however, Casey had thrown Churchill's weight into the argument over reinstatement, and on 18 November the War Cabinet brushed aside Eden's objections and strongly supported the Cairo Minister. In this meeting, it was stated that London must support the stance adopted by Casey in his dealings with Catroux; that the imprisoned Ministers were still considered the de jure Government; that they should revert to this status on release; that London could not recognise Eddé; and that the time-limit should be extended for 24 hours to 22 November. Eden, who had brought along a draft telegram to Casey stating that immediate reinstatement was undesirable, was overruled.³⁷ Casey had won the day, and his uncompromising telegram had tilted the balance in favour of reinstatement at the War Cabinet meeting. Later, the Cairo Minister was to receive personal confirmation of this in a letter from Lord Moyne, who attended this and other Cabinet meetings during the crisis.³⁸

Meanwhile, Spears had had "1½ hours of perfectly cordial but sterile conversation" with Catroux in Beirut. The Frenchman insisted that Helleu had acted on his own initiative. His action had been "impolitic" and, Catroux hinted, was inspired by the "mandatory outlook" of the local French. Spears then reminded Catroux that London had expected the release of the imprisoned Ministers by now, and could not understand his procrastination:

The only possible conclusion that [London], the Lebanese and neighbouring countries could draw from these delaying tactics was that he intended to use Helleu's totally inexcusable action as a bargaining counter to extract promises from the Lebanese before releasing the Ministers.

In full cry now, Spears demanded to know on what legal basis "if any" the Lebanese had been locked up, and gleefully demolished the various answers which Catroux produced. The offended Frenchman then declared

that if he were not given a completely free hand to negotiate in his own way and in his own time the French would withdraw from the Levant. He added that in this event he himself would fly back to Algiers...

Spears retorted that "world opinion" might, in that case, conclude that "the French did not desire to remain in the Levant unless they could exercise dictatorial powers".³⁹

By the evening of the 18th, Catroux had certainly given no indication of being on the point of meeting London's demands. He had in effect rejected them in his talks with Casey and Spears, and was now engaged in a smooth attempt to detach President Khoury from his fellow inmates of the Rachaya fortress. It was a typical Catroux solution: reinstatement of the President as a sop to local opinion, and dismissal of Riad Solh's Cabinet (to be done officially by Khoury) to legitimise Helleu's measures and reassert French prestige against those who would attack it. But Khoury was not prepared to be a French tool, and although "physically weakened" he defended his stance and refused Catroux's silky invitation to blame the whole tragedy on the machinations of Spears and a nationalist clique.⁴⁰

Catroux was still pondering this dignified rebuttal on the 19th when he became aware of the presence of Casey, who had come to Beirut to carry out his instructions. These were unchanged except for a day's extension of the time-limit, and they brought the Frenchman back to earth with a jolt. At 5.30pm, in Spears' house, Catroux was stiffly reminded by Casey that London had requested the recall of Helleu and the release of the Lebanese six days ago. The Lebanese should "revert to their status prior to the recent crisis", Casey added, stressing that London had still received no reply. Nevertheless it was hoped that Algiers would accept these demands, in which case London would propose a conference between Catroux and the Lebanese - in a neighbouring British territory - to seek a modus vivendi until the end of the war. This brought Casey to the crux of his statement. If the French failed to meet London's demands by 10 am

on 22 November, there would be an immediate declaration of British martial law in the Lebanon, and the imprisoned Lebanese would be liberated by British troops.

Poor Catroux, who had virtually ruled the Levant for two years, was thunderstruck. This was an ultimatum, he pointed out, and could only be passed on to Algiers. To receive this personally in Beirut, from the two men who had so often prodded him, was too much. "This looks like another Fashoda!" he exclaimed bitterly.* This splendid analogy was completely wasted on Casey, whose native hemisphere was relatively unscarred by Anglo-French imperial confrontations. He baldly asked Spears what on earth Catroux was talking about, and the abashed Englishman had to dispense a little Instant History before the proceedings continued. By this time Catroux had recovered his poise, and was taken quietly through each clause of the aide-mémoire, to avoid misunderstandings. He then said that the time-limit was very short, since his wires to Algiers were taking longer than expected. Casey replied that these demands had been known in Algiers for a week, and in any case he would be glad to send things on at top priority through MacMillan.

There were no more serious objections from Catroux. Rather like a subdued schoolboy whose project was late he said that "he had not wasted a moment since his arrival in Beirut". But Headmaster Casey sternly inquired whether he had released any of the Lebanese in all this time, which effectively silenced Catroux.⁴¹ The Frenchman's relatively mild reaction may not have been all good breeding. Perhaps he had already sensed that Casey had rescued him from a serious dilemma, not to mention the wrath of de Gaulle. For Khoury's stance had wrecked Catroux's only real chance of a settlement in Beirut, which left only the unacceptable alternatives of supporting the Beirut reactionaries - which Free France simply could not get away with - or backing down to the Riad Solh Government. This would have been a monumental blow to French prestige which de Gaulle would never tolerate. Now, however,

* Fashoda, in the Sudan, was the scene of a confrontation in 1898 between a small French force and Kitchener's army. The French withdrew after receiving a British ultimatum.

Catroux could tell his chief that all his good groundwork had been wrecked by the meddling British - a suggestion he did not entirely resist when he came to write his memoirs.⁴²

The next morning Catroux saw Spears again - Casey having returned to Cairo - and reported that Algiers' own solution had come in shortly after Casey's ultimatum. This was that the President was to be released and reinstated, and the Ministers released at Catroux's discretion but deprived of office. Spears replied that this solution was not likely to impress London, the neighbouring Arab countries, or the Lebanese themselves, who would continue to agitate until the Riad Solh Government returned. The 'Algiers solution' would therefore only cause more confrontation. On the other hand, if the French disavowed Helleu and cancelled his decrees, things could still be smoothed over. Catroux, who was "most amenable", agreed. He indicated that if he really had a free hand, he would take this line. The newer members of the Algiers Committee, he added, "would not have attempted to put the clock back". But thanks to de Gaulle and the Old Guard on the Committee, Catroux hinted, he did not really possess plenipotentiary powers. Spears kindly refrained from asking whether, in any case, Catroux would have used such powers, de Gaulle notwithstanding. Indeed, Spears told the Foreign Office that if Catroux had been truly in charge of the situation, "it would have been settled by now to our satisfaction".⁴³

On the 21st, London considered reports of Casey's meeting with Catroux, and Catroux's subsequent conversation with Spears on the 20th. At the same time it weighed up the submissions of MacMillan, who had now entered the reinstatement debate as a counterweight to Casey. On the 20th, Macmillan had given Casey's aide-memoire to Massigli, who remarked that it used the term "release" at one point and "revert to their status" at another. What was meant? Macmillan himself was unsure:

This appears to be a new and equivocal point....
It would seem...dangerous to risk future of Anglo-French relations on a point so ill-defined and on which we appear to be so undecided.

In a further wire, Macmillan asked whether London considered Riad Solh's Reform Bill of 8 November "a fait accompli" and whether it thought "that any subsequent negotiations should proceed on basis of validity of that bill? I presume not". In yet another wire, Macmillan reported that the Committee had now recommended the immediate recall of Helleu, as well as the reinstatement of the President and the release of the Ministers. The composition of the restored Cabinet could be negotiated, Macmillan argued, if Britain did not insist on immediate reinstatement of the old Riad Solh Cabinet. "I urge you even now to consider most seriously acceptance of such a solution".* It was not unreasonable, given "that we ourselves take the view that Prime Minister acted precipitately in passing Reform Bill". Finally, Macmillan urged London to at least consider the postponement of British martial law in the Lebanon.⁴⁴

In London, it was decided that Macmillan's main plea could not be entertained. Eden, now a convert to the Casey line, said that any Franco-Lebanese negotiations after the release could only be conducted with the legitimate Government, and this meant of course the reinstatement of the imprisoned Ministers. He made it sound so logical that it may well be asked why the Foreign Office had not seen this all along. Nevertheless it was decided that the general tendency of the Algiers Committee justified the postponement of the time-limit, which was extended for another 48 hours. Casey was duly informed, and Macmillan was told that "the French proposal to release the Ministers but not to recognise them...constitutes no solution", and that this must be made clear to Massigli without delay.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, on the morning of the 22nd, the President and Ministers were released by Catroux in Beirut, to the tune of the Algiers communiqué which stated that the President was reinstated

* "Running away", commented Spears on his copy of the telegram. Settling this old score in his memoirs (p.272), Spears claims that Macmillan "wilted" in de Gaulle's "overpowering presence". But Macmillan was asking London for a sop to encourage the Committee's tendency to defy de Gaulle.

and, less clearly, that the "former Lebanese Ministers" were "set free". At the same time Catroux handed Spears a stiff and proper repudiation of the British ultimatum.⁴⁶ The French had still not conceded the reinstatement of the Riad Solh Cabinet, but within 48 hours the unmistakable feelings and intentions of the Beirut crowds convinced Catroux that he would have to allow this. The released Ministers found themselves upon an even greater wave of enthusiasm and emotion than that which they rode before 11 November. Catroux made one last effort to detach Khoury from the others, an effort which was treated with contempt. He then retreated, waiting for Algiers to endorse his subsequent suggestion that the reinstatement of Riad Solh's Government was now unavoidable.⁴⁷

London began to wobble on the 23rd, backing away from its own stated intention of declaring martial law on the 24th. In Cairo, where Churchill was now ensconced in Casey's villa, there was no such wavering. The Prime Minister told Casey that he had received some "wishy-washy" wires from London.⁴⁸ Casey, keeping up with events in Beirut through Spears, brought in General Wilson and the three men concluded that the Riad Solh Cabinet "may very likely resume their functions as a Government during the day". Churchill therefore informed Attlee, his London deputy, that

If French wisely abstain from violent interference either towards members of Government... or against population, we shall in fact have obtained satisfaction.... Our declaration of martial law will remain in suspense. At any moment however French by firing on crowd or by some other imprudence may incite a renewal of crisis...in which case [British] troops will have to move in. 49

This was a good assessment of the situation, for in Beirut the unquenchable crowds simply bore their heroes back to Parliament unopposed. The hated Marines and Senegalese were nowhere to be seen, and a great tide of humanity filled the streets, its tributaries pouring down from the smallest mountain villages to join the stream of jubilation. The Riad Solh Government, carried along by the

Lebanese people, had reinstated itself.⁵⁰

On the 24th, Catroux accepted this fait accompli (at which he probably connived by ensuring that Riad Solh's re-entry of Parliament was unopposed) and called officially on the President and Ministers in their offices. Helleu had gone off to Algiers, and Catroux prepared to follow him, having appointed a Monsieur Chataigneau (actually "liked and admired" by Spears!) as the temporary Delegate-General. The shops in Beirut, which "had closed their iron shutters with the smart unanimity of alarmed oysters", were all open again. The immediate crisis had passed.⁵¹

At a press conference on 29 November the Lebanese Prime Minister stated that "negotiations for normalisation of Franco-Lebanese relations" had not yet begun. He added that such talks "will not take place on the basis of the mandate, but on that of equality and independence". Questioned on the status of the constitutional amendments of 8 November, Riad Solh stated that these still stood.⁵² The same theme was emphasised in Damascus. On the 27th, during a debate in the Syrian Chamber, it was repeatedly stated that the mandate had never been recognised by the Syrians themselves and was an unacceptable basis of negotiation. These noises culminated in a statement by the Syrian Prime Minister on 1 December, which brought the two Levant States openly into line against the French mandate. Syria, he declared, did not recognise the French mandate. His government's policy was recognition of Syrian independence by the United Nations, and Syrian readiness to put its territory and communications at the disposal of the Allied war effort. There were some interests which Syria shared with Lebanon, such as the Interêts Communs* and Customs, and these should now pass into the hands of the Levantines. Syria would make no treaty incompatible with "real independence", and therefore could not accept that the French might use some of these rights as bargaining counters.⁵³

* The Interêts Communs were revenues derived mainly from customs.

These open challenges, made when the French were in some disarray and when the British were still prepared to declare martial law, were not publicly disputed by the French. Yet in the aftermath of the crisis, the French lost less ground than many suggested or assumed. Spears certainly claimed too much in saying that "there was a sound as of falling chains" all over the Middle East.⁵⁴ For when the dust settled, the French were still there, grimly holding on and refusing to be drawn. Yet local French officials and soldiers were in an ugly frame of mind. Their attitude was "that of a slave merchant to an escaped slave". They were biding their time, and they would not or could not accept Syrian or Lebanese independence. Indeed, when Spears urged Catroux to rescind Helleu's decree nullifying Riad Solh's amendments, the wily Frenchman gave the local French attitude as his reason for postponing this bitter pill.⁵⁵

Thus, when Catroux returned to Algiers, the position was that the French still formally rejected any repudiation of the mandate. And when Catroux gave his parting exhortation to the French community, he counselled a calculating sort of patience rather than any acceptance of the inevitable. Claiming that the British had inflicted "a second Fashoda" upon them, Catroux said that it would be necessary to manifest "a new attitude" in the Levant States. But it was an act rather than a change of heart which Catroux seemed to be suggesting, for he added a prophetic rider: "Until France was restored, they had no alternative but to accept the present situation".⁵⁶ So it was back to the old game at which Catroux himself excelled - holding on, conceding a little now and then, waiting for a change of circumstances. Such a chance might well come when France itself was rid of the Germans.

At the end of November, Spears was beginning to realise that if any chains were falling in the Middle East, they were not those which bound him, however imperfectly, to the Foreign Office. It was soon apparent that the "Fashoda" scene with Catroux had been

the high tide of the Casey-Spears-Churchill combination in the Levant. A wire from Eden showed how the tide was turning:

I have been considering with Casey and Macmillan what is the best line to follow in the Levant now that recent crisis is over....

It should be our objective to bring about treaties between France and Lebanon and Syria under which France will have a position in Levant broadly corresponding to ours in Iraq. Recent events will have worsened French chance of negotiating such a treaty but having regard to our own position elsewhere it is not in our interest that Levant States should by unilateral action succeed in breaking all political ties with France....

Formal execution of treaties must await re-establishment of peace when...France will regain formal authority for treaty making. Meanwhile what is needed is a modus vivendi approaching as near as possible to projected terms of treaty....

If the Lebanese, as I expect, adopt a stiff attitude towards the French, the only people who can break the deadlock are ourselves. We may be in a position to help the French to save something out of the wreck of their position in the Levant. It is to our interest to do this....

If situation deteriorates...British martial law still remains open to us as a last resort, but this will only be adopted if security position imperatively demands. Prime Minister concurs. 57

In vain did Spears reply that the Levantines were simply not prepared to consider a treaty with France: "it is apparent either that I have failed to make clear to you the strength of Syrian and Lebanese determination to avoid...treaties with France at any stage, or alternatively that you appreciate this factor but consider it of no importance". It was a bit of both. London did not really trust Spears' accounts of the Levantine attitude, and failed to realise just how misleading the Iraq analogy was - and, accordingly, felt that something could still be done for the French if Britain offered to play the "honest broker". Spears retorted that the Levantines would "merely query the adjective and reject the offer".⁵⁸

After this exchange, in which Spears' own previous record obscured from the Foreign Office the truth of his report, communications between Beirut and London deteriorated into arid, fault-finding

post-mortems of the recent crisis.⁵⁹ The fundamental position was brought home to Spears once more during a meeting in Cairo on 6 December. There he was confronted by a galaxy of Foreign Office personnel, from Eden and Cadogan down, on their way back from Teheran. The "general feeling of the meeting", Lampson recorded, "was that the Lebanese would now have to put a little water in their wine". They must not "take the bit too much between their teeth and run amuck". Lampson himself repeated the well-worn maxim that "the precedent of tearing up a mandate unilaterally might easily have awkward repercussions for us", elsewhere in the Middle East. Spears saw no point in batting on this wicket, and after a few pro-Lebanese noises he said that he could maintain the status quo in the Levant until the war's end provided that there was no attempt to coerce the Levantines into signing some binding treaty before then. There the meeting ended, and Lampson rightly observed that "I do not know that it got us very far".⁶⁰

It was Catroux, that sensitive monitor of prevailing conditions, who most clearly saw which way the wind was blowing in the Levant. He was quickly convinced that treaty negotiations were out of the question for the time being, and contented himself with some fussing over French cultural interests. Having returned to the Levant with full powers, Catroux went about exuding goodwill, fortified by the noticeable change in London's demeanour since Helleu's dismissal. In the Commons, Eden expressed the hope that Catroux's negotiations would lead to an early agreement. London in turn was encouraged to hear from Spears that Catroux was being "most satisfactory and friendly" and enjoyed the "full support" of the Algiers Committee.⁶¹

On 22 December it was announced in Damascus that the Syrians and Lebanese had reached an agreement with Catroux regarding the transfer of "powers exercised in their name by the French authorities". This impressive statement did not mean that Catroux

had handed over everything, least of all the French mandatory claim itself. Basically it meant that the Interêts Communs, "together with their personnel, will be transferred to the Syrian and Lebanese States with the right of enacting laws and regulations, as from January 1st next".⁶² The arch-procrastinator had put off the evil day once more, assisted by London's goodwill and the Levantine wish to avoid any sort of treaty negotiations. By parading his readiness not to press this question, Catroux had scrambled out of the Helleu fiasco at a remarkably low price - conceding a service which had been the subject of Levantine demands for the last eighteen months in any case!

As far as negotiations, agreements, and any modus vivendi were concerned, this was the only formal result of the Lebanese crisis. Beneath all the fine words, Catroux and the Levantines had agreed to disagree. Nothing was settled on the issue of the mandate. On the French side, Helleu's decree concerning Riad Solh's Reform Bill was not rescinded, while the Lebanese regarded the decree as ultra vires. Both parties tacitly waited on future events and forces to settle the whole status of the Levant once and for all.

Psychologically, however, the crisis had some profound effects. On the French side, there was a lingering sense of defeat and humiliation, a resentment of the British, neatly expressed in the Fashoda slogan; there was a failure to realise that London wanted the French to retain a position in the Levant. (Given the behaviour of Churchill, Casey and Spears, it is hardly surprising that the French did not see the Foreign Office position very clearly). It was assumed, disastrously, that the French mandate would have to be reaffirmed by the hard men - French troops would be heavily reinforced and the impertinent Levantines would be compelled to negotiate a suitable treaty. In the mind of de Gaulle, in the thinking of French soldiers and officials in the Levant, the crisis had greatly intensified a siege mentality and a smouldering resentment.⁶³

For the peoples of the Levant, the crisis had given a staggering boost to nationalist sentiment. The Lebanese were proud of their successful defiance and felt an enormous new confidence in them-

selves. Having closed ranks as never before in the face of French threats, they discovered a new sense of unity among themselves and with the Syrians. France would henceforth have to contend with a vigorous political will in the Levant States which dwarfed anything that the British had faced in Egypt or Iraq when their treaties were negotiated. Hatred of the French was almost universal. The idea of independence had taken root and captured the simplest imaginations throughout the Levant, and the French were powerless to exorcise it. This was the most profound result of the crisis - independence had become a grassroots belief, a faith, and there could be no return to the pre-war euphemism which the French and the Foreign Office called independence - not without much bloodshed and repression, anyway.

For the majority of the Levantines, November 1943 meant that they had asserted their independence before the world and the French had been unable to stop them. For the French, it meant a deadly insult and a temporary reverse which would have to be remedied at a more suitable time. What it really signified was that the old order of mandatory treaties was a thing of the past - but at the end of 1943, neither the French nor the Foreign Office understood this. Both were thinking of an anachronism and calling it a future settlement.

NOTES

- 1 Spears, Fulfilment, p.224f; Spears tel.(637), 11 November 1943, SPRS III/3.
- 2 Spears tels.(637, 638), 11 November 1943, SPRS III/3.
- 3 Coghill Diary, p.35, Wartime Jottings, p.36.
- 4 Casey, Personal Experience, p.144; extract from Casey Diary in SPRS III/4.
- 5 Spears tel.(644), 11 November 1943, SPRS III/3.
- 6 Coghill Diary, pp.33-36.
- 7 Spears Diary, December 1944, SPRS I/1.
- 8 Spears, Fulfilment, p.228ff.
- 9 SPRS III/3, 3a. These files contain over 400 long telegrams.
- 10 Harvey Diary, 11 July 1942.
- 11 Casey tel., 11 November 1943, SPRS III/3.
- 12 Casey tel. (KK/138), 11 November 1943, SPRS III/3.
- 13 Spears tel. (665), 14 November 1943, SPRS III/3.
- 14 de Gaulle, ii.200f.
- 15 de Gaulle (Documents), ii.292f.
- 16 Coghill Diary, p.19.
- 17 Beirut Legation, "Review of the Year 1943 in the Lebanon", SPRS III/4; Casey, Personal Experience, p.143; Spears tel. (705), 17 November 1943, SPRS III/3.
- 18 Coghill Diary, p.35.
- 19 Spears tel.(651), 12 November 1943; Spears tels. (659,660), 13 November 1943; Spears tel. (674), 14 November 1943: SPRS III/3.
- 20 Cornwallis tel. 11 November 1943; Cornwallis tels. (1076-8). 13 November 1943; Lampson tel., 12 November 1943; Foreign Office tel., 13 November 1943: SPRS III/3.
- 21 Makins tel., 12 November 1943, SPRS III/3.
- 22 Macmillan tel., 13 November 1943, SPRS III/3.

- 23 Foreign Office tel., (7785), 12 November 1943, SPRS III/3. Spears' angry red ink is scrawled across the top of this copy.
- 24 Spears tel., (661), 13 November 1943, SPRS III/3.
- 25 Casey tel., (Beirut 668), 14 November 1943, SPRS III/3.
- 26 Casey tel., (Beirut 667), 14 November 1943, SPRS III/3.
- 27 Foreign Office tel., 13 November 1943, SPRS III/3.
- 28 Macmillan tel., 14 November 1943, SPRS III/3.
- 29 F0371/35185/E6963; Foreign Office tel., (3590), 15 November 1943, SPRS III/3.
- 30 Casey tels., (2591, 2593, 2598), 14, 15, 16 November, 1943, SPRS III/3; Casey, Personal Experience, p.144f.
- 31 Spears tels., (679, 685), 15 November 1943, SPRS III/3. Spears, Fulfilment, pp.230, 258-260.
- 32 Walter Lippmann, New York Herald Tribune, 16 November 1943; Our Special Correspondent (Cairo), Daily Telegraph, 15 November 1943; Interview with Gerald Norman, 9-10 November 1976 - cf. "A Danger in the Levant", From Our Special Correspondent Lately in the Lebanon, Times, 15-16 November, 1943.
- 33 Foreign Office tel., (3621), 17 November 1943, SPRS III/3.
- 34 Foreign Office tel., (3623), 17 November 1943, SPRS III/3 - and quoted by the dissenting Macmillan in his 2424 of 20 November.
- 35 Casey tel., (2624), 18 November 1943, SPRS III/3.
- 36 Catroux quoted in Casey tel., (2598), 16 November 1943, SPRS III/3.
- 37 F0371/35185/E6946.
- 38 Casey Diary extract, SPRS III/4; Casey, Personal Experience, p.148; Spears, Fulfilment, p.258.
- 39 Spears tel., (699), 17 November 1943, SPRS III/3.
- 40 Catroux tel., 19 November 1943, de Gaulle (Documents), ii.293f; Catroux, Dans La Bataille, p.419f.
- 41 Casey tels., (Beirut 717, 718), 19 November 1943, SPRS III/3a; Casey tel., 21 November 1943, PREM 3 421; Casey, Personal Experience, p.145f; Catroux, Dans La Bataille, p.420ff; Spears, Fulfilment, pp.262-266.
- 42 Catroux, Dans La Bataille, pp.411-428.

- 43 Spears tel.(723), 20 November 1943, SPRS III/3a.
- 44 Macmillan tels.(2423, 2424, 2426, 2432), 20 November 1943, and No.2437 of 21 November 1943: SPRS III/3a.
- 45 FO371/35188/E7146, 35190/E7191; Foreign Office tel., (2742), 21 November 1943, SPRS III/3a.
- 46 Spears tel.(745), 22 November 1943, SPRS III/3a; de Gaulle (Documents), ii.296; Spears, Fulfilment, p.274ff.
- 47 Spears tel.(746), 22 November 1943, SPRS III/3a.
- 48 Foreign Office tel.(2761), 23 November 1943, SPRS III/3a; Casey, Personal Experience, p.146f.
- 49 Repeated to Beirut in Casey tel., 23 November 1943, SPRS III/3a.
- 50 Spears tels.(756,757), 23 November 1943, SPRS III/3a; Beirut Legation, "Review of the Year 1943 in the Lebanon", SPRS III/4; Spears, Fulfilment, p.275f.
- 51 Spears tel.(761), 24 November 1943, SPRS III/3a; Beirut Legation, "Review", SPRS III/4; Spears, Fulfilment, p.230.
- 52 Spears tel.(785), 30 November 1943, SPRS III/3a; Beirut Legation "Review", SPRS III/4.
- 53 Spears tel.(778), 28 November 1943; Spears tel.(805), 4 December 1943: SPRS III/3a.
- 54 Spears, Fulfilment, p.281.
- 55 Spears tel.(774), 26 November 1943; Spears tel.(761), 24 November 1943: SPRS III/3a.
- 56 Spears tel.(790), 30 November 1943, SPRS III/3a. Catroux was "most reliably reported" to have said these things in an exclusively-French gathering. Security was always bad in Beirut!
- 57 Eden tel., 26-27 November 1943, SPRS III/3a.
- 58 Spears tel.(784), 30 November 1943, SPRS III/3a.
- 59 Spears and Foreign Office tels. between 24 November and 23 December 1943 (Spears papers numbering 325-405), SPRS III/3a.
- 60 Lampson Diary, 6 December 1943, published in Trefor Evans (ed.), The Killearn Diaries, 1934-1946, (1972), p.270; Spears, Fulfilment, p.280ff.
- 61 Account of Syrian and Lebanese conversations with Catroux in Spears tel.(789), 30 November 1943; Spears tel.(844), 18 November 1943: SPRS III/3a.
- 62 Spears tel.(856), 23 December 1943, SPRS III/3a.
- 63 This is exemplified in de Gaulle's distorted and somewhat paranoid version of the Lebanese crisis - de Gaulle, ii.198-203.

One thought alone preoccupies the submerged mind of Empire: how not to end, how not to die, how to prolong its era. J.M. Coetzee*

Let him go as a scapegoat into the wilderness.
Leviticus xvi.10

On the surface, the year 1944 was relatively uneventful in the Levant, and from an Allied point of view a satisfactory level of order was maintained. The war itself moved ever westward. Italy had surrendered, and the Germans had been driven back through the Ukraine by the Red Army. The Levant was no longer threatened, and the Middle East was now a staging-post for Allied supplies and communications. The Free French were largely preoccupied with the great events culminating in the Normandy landings, the liberation of France and the establishment of de Gaulle's provisional government in Paris. The Syrians and Lebanese avoided spectacular confrontations with the French, quietly consolidated their gains, and made further requests in a more restrained manner. The Levant States kept out of the world headlines.

Yet these calm appearances were deceptive. Beneath the surface, the Levant was seething with unsettled questions. The local gendarmerie, endeavouring to cope with a volatile and well-armed populace, needed newer and better weapons - but the control of this police force, and the nature of its weaponry, became an endless three-way dispute between the Levantines, the French and the British. Likewise the transfer of the locally-stationed levies, the Troupes Spéciales, was the subject of futile representations throughout the year. Behind these specific issues lurked the fundamental Franco-Levantine deadlock over the validity of the mandate and the negotiation of a treaty. From time to time the ticking of this time-bomb could be heard above the daily concerns of the Levant, whereupon both sides simply repeated their views and

* Waiting for the Barbarians (1980), p.133.

postponed the inevitable confrontation. The Syrians and Lebanese, their governments recognised by Britain, the United States, the Soviet Union, China and many other states, were confident that the international Allied community would soon guarantee and ratify their independence. The Levantines therefore confined themselves to "putting at [the] disposal of Allies" their territory and communications, consolidating their position and pursuing the transfer of the gendarmerie, the Troupes Spéciales and a few less-controversial services.¹

Holding actions were an even more fundamental tactic for both the French and Spears himself in 1944. General Beynet, the new French Delegate-General in the Levant, strove to maintain the status quo without further concessions, stubbornly denying that the mandate was a dead letter or that Levantine independence could be finalised without a Franco-Levantine treaty. On the whole, however, he held these views in a quiet and unobtrusive manner, and seemed content to play the game suggested by Catroux - accepting the situation "until France was restored". There were ominous undertones to Beynet's apparent calm and moderation, as his occasional outbursts revealed.

These considerations were not lost on Spears, who was anxious to remain in the Levant, to support the republics against any French retaliation, and to render Syrian and Lebanese independence irreversible. As 1944 progressed, however, Spears found it increasingly difficult to continue in his old style, for his many opponents were closing in, hampering his movements, and preparing the ground for his dismissal. Spears was therefore obliged to fight a desperate holding action of his own. Casey had gone, and although Lord Moyne (Casey's replacement) continued to be sympathetic on the whole, time was running out for Spears. There were signs that Eden was finally penetrating the armour of Churchillian comradeship which had protected the Beirut Minister for so long. Churchill

himself had nearly broken with de Gaulle on several occasions, he admired Spears for his unflinching way with the French, and he had long rejected Eden's complaints as either Gaullist-inspired or as echoes of Whitehall's professional jealousy. But even the Prime Minister was slowly perceiving that Spears, despite his past, had become a Francophobe and a partisan of Levantine independence. Churchill began to rebuke Spears, who fought desperately to defend and retain his position until the dangerous ambiguities had been removed from the situation in the Levant. In 1944 Spears, like the French in the Levant, found himself grimly holding on.

In the aftermath of the Lebanese crisis and the negotiations with Catroux, the Levantines and the French went quietly about their own affairs in the early months of 1944. Spears also enjoyed the comparative calm after the hectic activities of the previous months, and he was basking in the warmth of Churchill's continued approval. In December the Prime Minister, returning from Teheran, had seen Spears in Cairo and congratulated him for his handling of the Lebanese crisis. As Spears noted:

He was very friendly...

He told me that I had done very well in extremely difficult circumstances. He said I had shown restraint and judgment and had found a solution on democratic lines. He said I must remain in the Levant to carry on my difficult task.

I told him how I was sniped at constantly by the Foreign Office and he seemed to be fully alive to this (having been coached by Casey), he said this was the way with people who were not of their own kind...

Gratified by this welcome support, Spears missed the significance of a warning note which Churchill included in his remarks, a note which indicated where he and Spears parted company over the French mandatory position:

He spoke to me of the dangers inherent in... the Levant which might raise issues of positive danger to ourselves in other parts of the world. What people might learn to do against the French in the Levant might be turned to account against us later. We should discourage the throwing of stones since we had greenhouses of our own - acres and acres of them, he said. 2

Spears had just heard the same argument from Lampson and the Foreign Office mandarins in Cairo, but if he saw the point he seems to have been either unwilling or unable to let it alter his style.

It was still Churchill's fundamental support, rather than his mild warning, which impressed Spears in the early stages of 1944, and he would have been further gratified to hear the Prime Minister tell de Gaulle in January that the "sudden and violent action which [Helleu] had taken in [the Lebanon] had produced a deplorable impression".³ This remark was reported to the Foreign Office by Duff Cooper, who had just gone out to Algiers as Ambassador to the French National Committee. Duff Cooper had had much in common with Spears until 1941. Unlike Spears, however, he was convinced that de Gaulle was "the only possible leader" for the new France, and he strove to improve Anglo-Gaullist relations. He also believed that

The conduct of General Spears [suggested] that it was his policy to drive the French out of Syria and the Lebanon, with the assistance of the natives, in order that the British should take their place there. This was not the policy of the Foreign Office, nor of the Prime Minister, but to attempt to persuade the French of this was [a] waste of time, so long as Spears remained at Beirut.

Thus, although he described Spears as "a good friend", Duff Cooper now considered him "a fatal impediment to improved Anglo-French relations".⁴

The Algiers Ambassador was not the man to admit impediments, and in February he wrote to Churchill:

Lady Spears has paid us an unexpected visit this week, and...has left me in no doubt that... her husband [means to] maintain the rights of the native populations of the Levant against the dominant Power, and even to encourage natives to assert these rights.... We have surely enough native problems of our own to face without stirring up native problems for others.... Spears, owing to what I think is a mistaken view of his local objective, seems to have altered the whole of his European policy and to have become definitely, if not violently, francophobe. He is certainly considered so by all the many branches of French opinion.... I do not believe there will be peace in the Levant so long as [Spears] remains there.

...perhaps consideration could be given to the three years' disfranchisement that has befallen the burghers of Carlisle.*

No doubt Spears would have felt vindicated if he had seen Churchill's terse reply to this remarkable request: "Nothing doing about the burghers of Carlisle".⁵ As it was, Spears never saw this correspondence until it appeared in Duff Cooper's memoirs, and his own eventual comment was that "Winston continued to stand by me".⁶

This was not entirely true, even in the immediate sense, for within three weeks of Duff Cooper's letter, Spears received a serious and unexpected rebuke from the Prime Minister. Churchill had never had the time or inclination to look at detailed material on the Levant, but this time - possibly troubled by Duff Cooper's letter - he looked into a bulky Lebanese crisis file, which included some of Spears' wildest anti-French and anti-Whitehall telegrams.⁷ Greatly disturbed, Churchill sent Spears a signal on 10 March, using language remarkably similar to that of Duff Cooper:

From your long series of telegrams which I have read you seem drawn too much to a pro-native and anti-French line. I told you in Cairo that I had no wish to destroy French influence in Syria.... You are however going further than I wish and anyone can see you have become bitterly anti-French. Our relations with the French National Committee are improving. [De Gaulle] has become more reasonable and my relations with him are much better.

* Spears' Parliamentary constituency.

"You should be careful to avoid an anti-French policy in Syria", Churchill concluded. "Admire efficiency and vigilance of your work but "surtout pas trop de zèle".

Spears was astonished and dismayed. "Greatly depressed by your telegram", he replied:

You told me in Cairo that I had done well in a difficult situation, and this was the greatest encouragement to me. I said it would be my endeavour to keep things ticking over until the end of the war. This I have been endeavouring to do, and I can honestly say that I have done nothing to make the position of the French more difficult. 8

This claim was too much for Eden, who commented to Churchill that Spears' Francophobia was a by-word in the Middle East, and that his reputation prevented London from maintaining adequate contacts with the French in the Levant, as the French would not confide in Spears. Seizing his opportunity, Eden argued that since the French had improved their behaviour and dismissed some undesirable officials in the Levant, it was an appropriate time to replace Spears. Churchill, however, was anxious to give his old comrade a chance to heed his warning. On 2 April he refused Eden's request.⁹ A month later, commenting on Spears' report of French troops firing on the Lebanese Parliament buildings during a riot, Churchill told Eden that "I have warned Spears about taking a too pro-Lebanese and anti-French view; but...he is quite justified in reporting these facts. After all, we are pledged to the cause of Lebanese independence". For the time being Eden, who no longer trusted Spears' reports, held his peace.¹⁰

The Foreign Secretary soon found fresh anti-Spears material in the controversy which had been developing in the Levant over the re-arming of the gendarmerie and the transfer of the Troupes Spéciales to the control of the Syrian and Lebanese governments. In both these issues, he held, Spears had exceeded his authority and injected his own policy objectives, complicating relatively simple questions and inflaming Anglo-French relations. Whether these issues were really so simple, and whether a more neutral British Minister could have

resolved them satisfactorily, is doubtful, to say the least. But by 1944 the Foreign Office had developed a Spears fixation, and his role in these labyrinthine disputes was greatly exaggerated in London.*

Obsessed with Spears, Eastern Department failed to appreciate the extent to which the Levantine and French attitudes rendered the latest disputes interminable. For the Syrians and Lebanese were demanding their "rights" in a hard and steely manner, and the French were plainly determined to make no more piecemeal concessions without a treaty. These frustrating realities were frequently overlooked at the Foreign Office, where perspectives on the Levant were distorted by the Eurocentric overview which made Anglo-Gaullist cooperation essential.¹¹ Eastern Department, the self-confessed Cinderella of this policy, was therefore saddled with a preconceived approach to any problem in the Levant, and its inability to satisfy Whitehall's higher considerations seems to be reflected in its flustered handling of the current disputes and its tendency to use Spears as a scapegoat for all its troubles. Personal animosities between Peterson and his subordinates on one side, and Spears on the other, simply thickened the fog of pre-conceptions through which London peered towards the Levant.¹²

Whether Whitehall liked it or not, the Syrians and Lebanese had a particularly strong case in the matter of the gendarmerie, and the initial French response to this question was clearly inadequate and irresponsible. The fact was that the maintenance of basic law and order, and the enforcement of any particular edicts from Beirut and Damascus, was a dangerous proposition in many parts of the Levant. In the Lebanese region north of Baalbek, well-armed tribes carried on a semi-independent existence. The same was true of the Alaouite region, (a mountainous area near the Syrian coast), the Jebel Druse and the vast desert areas of Syria. The immediate responsibility for

* This was virtually inevitable after all the confrontations of 1943 (See Ch. 6),

policing all these areas lay with the gendarmerie, who were under the practical control of the Syrian and Lebanese governments. Early in 1944, the plight of this force was revealed by its inability to deal with a number of serious disturbances.¹³ The situation had become completely absurd by May 1944. In that month the gendarmerie had to call on regular troops to help them quell what even Eastern Department admitted was "a minor civil war" in northern Lebanon, whilst in Syria the gendarmerie had been seen off by an Alaouite chieftain called Suliman Murshid, whose arsenal included automatic weapons and a cannon.¹⁴

It was against this background that the Levantine governments had originally approached Spears and Holmes with a request for assistance in re-arming the gendarmerie, whose weapons and equipment were patently obsolete. The Levantines were duly and properly referred to the French, and failed to get any effective response. At this point Holmes, who had certainly never lent himself to Spears' personal aspirations for the Levant, felt that something had to be done. As the Allied Commander in the Levant, ultimately responsible for all security and order, Holmes had seen enough to be convinced that the gendarmerie must be quickly re-armed and improved. He therefore asked the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, to press for the provision of arms from French resources.¹⁵

The need for such action was underlined by the French response to an emergency request for an advance of 1,000 rifles for the 7,000 gendarmerie.* The French offered the Syrians a mere 200 obsolete carbines (made in 1907) at an exorbitant price. "This", Hankey admitted three months later, "has made everyone doubt their good faith".¹⁶ At time, however, the Foreign Office simply overlooked these eloquent facts. It was pre-occupied with the diplomatic improprieties which were now committed by the exasperated British authorities in the Middle East:

* As Lord Moyne pointed out to the Foreign Office, "7000 Gendarmerie seems a moderate force as compared with about 9000 regular police in Palestine.... Levant States have more than double population of Palestine" - Moyne tel., 23 July 1943, FO371/40316/E5031.

On 20 June 1944, at the request of [Middle East Command] HM Minister [Spears] informed the Syrian and Lebanese Governments and the French that as the French authorities could not supply the arms and equipment required, the British would do so... 17

"Sir E. Spears has gone off the rails", exclaimed Peterson, who promptly assumed that the British offer to the Levant governments was another Spears manœuvre. Peterson simply did not believe that Spears had acted on behalf of the British military authorities, (which was, after all, one of his twin tasks in the Levant). It was to become clear that Peterson's assumption was false, but in the meantime his suspicions were elevated into official Foreign Office indignation. "It certainly does seem to me highly undesirable that General Spears should cook up with the local Governments...provisions which must be seriously distasteful to the French", minuted Cadogan, blindly following Peterson.¹⁸

This unwarranted conclusion was taken up by Eden to be used as fresh evidence against Spears. On 29 June the Foreign Secretary wrote to Churchill and tried again:

I have mentioned to you on several occasions the unfortunate and continuous tension which prevails in the Levant owing to the conviction which the French entertain sincerely and not without justification that Spears' objective is to get them out altogether.

Having neatly laid all Levantine difficulties at Spears' door, Eden complained that Spears had made an "unauthorised" offer to supply arms to the gendarmerie. This was technically justified, since the Levantine governments themselves controlled the gendarmerie, but Eden argued that "from the diplomatic point of view there is absolutely nothing to be said for Spears' method of procedure".

Moreover, Eden complained, Spears had bungled certain negotiations over the Troupes Spéciales. "Entirely of his own volition he appears to have inserted a clause which will debar the French henceforward from maintaining more troops in the Levant States than they have there already". The French would be furious, Eden said,

and since Britain also maintained troops in Iraq and Egypt, it was "an unhealthy precedent". This accusation was also based on nothing more solid than Peterson's suspicions, which completely underestimated the Syrian and Lebanese politicians and attributed all anti-French strategy to Spears alone. By the previous standards of the mandatory powers in the Middle East, an undertaking not to increase French forces in the Levant was certainly an "extraordinary stipulation" - but Peterson's assumption that the offending clause was simply a product of Spears' "own initiative" showed how far Eastern Department was out of touch with Levantine realities. The Syrians and Lebanese themselves were convinced that a resurgent France would eventually attempt to impose a settlement in the Levant, and they were leaving no stone unturned to counter this possibility or at least to expose French intentions. Obviously the French would be unable to dictate to the Levantines if the 24,000 Troupes Spéciales were locally-controlled and the French were unable to disembark further troops. Nevertheless Peterson promptly ascribed this ploy to Spears, and Eden repeated the charge in his petition to Churchill. The Foreign Secretary concluded by asking that Spears be brought home "for consultation" and told "not to undermine the French in the Levant".¹⁹

"By all means bring him home for consultation", Churchill replied puckishly: "Not being a Foreign Office official is of course a disadvantage, but no-one has stood up better for British interests. I hope there will be no change in policy while he is away!".²⁰ This last remark was perhaps more pertinent than Churchill realised, for the Foreign Office seems to have arranged a little undermining of its own. Several career diplomats had already been transferred away from Beirut, including Spears' indispensable lieutenant, Lascelles. While Spears was in London, a new Chargé d'Affaires took over in Beirut and proceeded to gather what evidence he could that Spears had been pursuing an anti-French policy. This unedifying affair revealed

the extent of London's Spears-fixation, and its firm intention to scuttle its rogue diplomat.²¹

This attitude was reflected in the strength of Eden's retort to Churchill:

Many who are not Foreign Office officials have contrived to work quite happily under the Foreign Secretary... Nor am I clear what are the British interests for which Spears has stood up... On any long view I do not believe [his conduct] to be to our advantage.... neighbouring Middle East states may...try to imitate the success of the Syrians and Lebanese in ridding themselves of all foreign associations.

My object [is] to impress upon [Spears] that while we must fulfil the pledges we have given to Syria and Lebanon, we do not want to go beyond that and weaken the French in these areas for the fun of the thing. If you would join me in such a lecture it would be worth while to have him back.

On 15 July Churchill replied that he had warned Spears some time ago and would repeat his "advice" if Spears was recalled to London for discussions.²²

In the meantime, the question of re-arming the gendarmerie had become hopelessly deadlocked. In London's view - echoed and confirmed by Duff Cooper in Algiers - this was almost entirely the fault of Spears. Their view was based on the fact that Spears virtually ignored and frustrated a Foreign Office signal that the question should be referred to an Anglo-French Committee. But this view itself ignored the fact that the issue was being strongly pressed by both Paget (the British Commander-in-Chief in Cairo) and Holmes, and that Spears claimed to be wearing his military hat in this affair. As head of the Spears (military) Mission in the Levant, Spears was responsible for conveying the wishes of the Allied Commander to the subordinate French General, Humblot. In reality, this whole affair had become a first-class demarcation dispute. The British military authorities considered that the French were being thoroughly unco-operative in a serious matter of order and security. The French looked on it as a political issue, in which British aims were being

pursued under a military guise. When the Foreign Office did recognise that it was not simply Spears, but Holmes, Paget and the War Office who had to be dealt with, they took the view that the soldiers were being high-handed and politically naïve, and would have to be put in their place.

In the midst of all this stood that dual being, Major-General Sir Edward Spears. By a piece of Manichaeian bureaucracy, he had been made Sir Edward Jekyll and General Hyde with the blessing of Eden himself, and the folly of this dual appointment was now painfully evident. Spears himself had admittedly sought and welcomed his double authority, but it was Eden and the War Office who had arranged this curious appointment. In all the wrangling over the gendarmerie, however, the Foreign Office seemed to ignore Spears' military position, and all his activities were interpreted as though the man was subordinate to the Foreign Office alone, and had no business to be collaborating with Holmes and Paget. Ironically, had Spears insisted on the primacy of politics, taken the matter away from the soldiers and entrusted it to an Anglo-French Committee, he would probably have been accused by the British military authorities of failing as Head of the Spears Mission. In the past, the Foreign Office had shown equal readiness to condemn Spears whenever he upset Holmes or Middle East Command. The fundamental problem, as usual, lay in the ambiguous Anglo-French presence in the Levant. Spears' own dual appointment was a microcosm of this whole contradictory arrangement.

On 3 July Spears had informed the Foreign Office that he was unable to refer the gendarmerie issue to an Anglo-French Committee, and invoked Paget's authority. The Foreign Office then sought, without success, to have Paget brought to heel by means of the Lyttelton-de Gaulle agreement. On 11 July, Holmes met Humblot in Beirut and advised him that Paget had decided to equip and re-arm the gendarmerie. Two days later Paget himself conferred with Humblot and the two Generals agreed that the gendarmerie should be equipped on the scale of other such forces in the Middle East. On the 17th,

however, the French suddenly announced that they had been forbidden to discuss the matter any further. Algiers had now stepped in.²³

These developments inspired a flurry of telegrams from London, Beirut, Cairo and Algiers. On 14 July Spears complained of the increasing tendency of French to take up matters in Algiers without attempting to get them settled locally; and, without even informing themselves of the facts, to plunge in with hot protests. 24

Unfortunately for Spears, London itself had now developed this same tendency, and the overriding consideration at the Foreign Office was the existence of a thorny Anglo-French problem. On the 17th the Free French in London complained to the Foreign Office that Humblot had not been consulted but simply informed of British decisions, and that a considerable quantity of arms had been duly handed over to the gendarmerie by the British. On the same day Duff Cooper wired that "It is now plain that there has been no consultation with the French as was promised but that General Humblot was sent for by his superior officer [Paget and simply] informed". Lord Moyne, on the other hand, wired from Cairo that Paget had stated "that during his recent meeting with Humblot at Beirut, the French never disputed the necessity for re-arming the gendarmerie".²⁵

It was the Algiers emphasis which impressed the Foreign Office, despite the facts reported by Spears on 18 July:

No (repeat no) arms have yet been issued to the gendarmerie; nor has any of the equipment of which the army Commander gave the French [a] list on July 11th.... French statement to the contrary is typical example of the sort of garbling that seems inevitable when [stories] reach you through French sources in Algiers....

Spears went on to report that he had duly informed the Levantine governments of the Paget-Humblot agreement to supply arms to the gendarmerie, and pointed out that

The locals are at the moment extremely suspicious of the French, owing to recent difficulties over [Troupes Spéciales, whom the French flatly refused to hand over]. If the French were now to procure a hold-up in re-equipping of gendarmerie their feelings will inevitably be exacerbated...

In a separate wire Spears amplified the local suspicion that "the French do not wish the gendarmerie to be adequately armed so that there should be no local force capable of resisting a coup if and when it suits the French to attempt another one".²⁶

This sinister possibility was pooh-poohed in Eastern Department, where it was glibly argued that the French had only three battalions in the Levant. This ignored the fact that they still controlled, officered and paid the 24,000 Troupes Spéciales, and completely overlooked the possibility that the French might attempt to disembark fresh troops in the future. In fact the Foreign Office continued to discount this possibility for some time. In July 1944 Spears' warning was dismissed as a "diatribe" by Hankey, who was more interested in asserting that the Levantine governments should not have been informed of the arrangements for arming the gendarmerie. "This is absolute insubordination", he fumed, begging the question of Spears' exact subordination in this case.²⁷

Peterson agreed that Spears was "jumping the fences for us in a quite unjustifiable way". Sir Maurice had now discovered that the gendarmerie dispute was not, as he had originally claimed, purely the work of Spears - but he neatly shifted his ground without altering his basic premise:

The whole trouble is not only that our Generals have been stupid but that if and when they have sought for political guidance they have...sought it from a man who is a great deal more than stupid.

This judgment was once more passed on to Eden, and Spears was duly told that His Majesty's Government could not endorse his action in informing the Levantine governments, and that he should make sure that no arms were delivered until London said so.²⁸

Cairo now made its own attempts to account for the muddle, but in trying to strike a balance Lord Moyne telegraphed sets of isolated statements from which Eastern Department selected suitable sentences. On 19 July he first implied that the French were too hard to please and that recent military discussions should

have "constituted consultation sufficient to save everyone's face". Then he said that Spears had ignored a Foreign Office instruction, and finally he stated that the British commanders seemed to be treating the French soldiers as mere subordinates - a curious complaint in view of the Allied chain of command. In a subsequent wire Moyne alleged that Spears had "stimulated the instinctive army dislike of decisions affecting security being questioned in war time", but concluded that while "I am not in agreement with the way Spears has handled the matter, the French themselves have been very difficult".²⁹

Spears himself believed there was a root cause of the controversy. In his view it was the imposition of external desiderata from London and Algiers:

the very simply question of the rearming of the gendarmerie has assumed such inordinate proportions because it has become the subject of a triangular controversy instead of being handled locally as a military matter.... a solution would have been found by now but for the interference of Algiers. [You are] attempting to deal with this small matter 3000 miles away. 30

When due allowance is made for the likelihood that neither Spears nor the British commanders employed sufficient tact with the local French, it must be said that Spears had a strong point, though it did nothing to raise his rock-bottom popularity in the Foreign Office. Security and order in the Levant States was exceedingly dubious, and would remain so until the gendarmerie could compete with local bandits and heavily-armed tribes. This point was underlined by Lord Moyne on 23 July:

armament and motor transport must be superior to that of tribes with whom gendarmerie have to deal. Failure at Beirut to bring about agreement by consultation with the French... does not affect yielding on main issue.

Offer by French of obsolete carbines at 4½ times the price of a new Enfield rifle has already provoked great alarm as to French intentions after our departure. 31

This local situation was, however, set aside for the moment. It was the wider question of Anglo-French discord and the concept

of Spears as the culprit which was dominant in the Foreign Office. On the 19th Duff Cooper had reported Massigli's protests that Beynet and Humblot had been dictated to by Spears and Holmes, and that "British policy...as I had described it to him, was not being carried out". Tellingly, Duff Cooper added that he had been acutely embarrassed: "I cannot admit to Massigli that [Spears] has failed to carry out policy of His Majesty's Government, whereas I cannot conceal [this] from myself".³² This wire, and Moyne's statement that Spears had ignored Foreign Office instructions, were now flourished in Eastern Department as proof-texts for the prevailing view: "We shall never make sense of the Levant while Sir E. Spears is there", declared Hankey, and Baxter added that "but for [Spears'] deplorable methods of handling the French there is no reason whatever why this trivial question should ever have produced a crisis".³³ No good reason, perhaps, but in all the apoplexy over Spears' "insubordination" - an inadequate complaint - London missed the causal fact that the urgent needs of the gendarmerie had been arbitrarily dismissed by the French, whose future calculations were but thinly concealed.

The "prevailing wind" from Algiers was now blowing harder than ever. On 20 July Duff Cooper wrote to Eden and reported another awkward encounter with Massigli. The latter asked that the following questions be put personally to Eden:

- (1) Was the policy of His Majesty's Government being carried out in the Levant? If so the French would have to reconsider the whole position.
- (2) If not, what steps did we propose to take to ensure that our policy should be carried out there?

Duff Cooper dissuaded Massigli from putting these blunt questions officially, but of course in this unofficial form they could be taken seriously without loss of face. The Ambassador also forwarded a personal note to Eden from Massigli who complained about the gendarmerie dispute and repeated his questions on what policy was

being pursued at Beirut. Duff Cooper added that "I think you are as convinced as I am that things can only go from bad to worse in the Levant so long as Spears remains there". This was certainly Eden's view although this despatch was bad form by diplomatic standards. Nevertheless Eden was content to tell Massigli at their next meeting that he was "rather sorry" to receive the letter, and conspicuously avoided defending Spears at all.³⁴

By this time Eden had told Spears to "return to London immediately for...consultation. Prime Minister and I are concerned over the new difficulties which are springing up with the French". Spears reluctantly left Beirut on 24 July.³⁵ In London he found himself effectively isolated and idle until the latter part of August. This time there were no pleasant sessions with Churchill, who was either unavailable or out of the country throughout August. Spears was kept on ice while the Foreign Office suspended further action over the gendarmerie and arranged top level Anglo-French talks on the Levant. All he could do before these talks was to write to Eden, urging him "to make it clear to the French now that our pledge of independence to the Levant States is a permanent feature of British policy", which would persuade the French to "abandon hope of putting the clock back by violent means". Spears considered this necessary because

the Algiers committee is thinking in terms of re-establishing their position by force when... a suitable opportunity presents itself. They... believe that, presented by a fait accompli, we should not react, [because] the importance of good Anglo-French relations in a wider sphere would make it difficult for us to do so.... this is clearly a most dangerous situation. 36

Eden was not impressed. "I cannot bring myself to believe that the policy of recovering by force what has been given up will be adopted by any future French Government", he replied. Eden argued that a liberated France would be overwhelmed with internal problems and "adventures abroad" would be ruled out. (This vastly underestimated de Gaulle's determination to resurrect the entire French Empire, as far away as Indochina). As for the Levant, Eden now

thought that the French themselves were in some danger, for the Lebanese crisis had "tilted the balance somewhat unduly against them".³⁷

This gave Spears a good indication of the prevailing wind, and the conversations which began for him on 24 August soon confirmed his worst fears.* There he found General Holmes on good terms with his arch-enemy Peterson, who was flanked by Baxter and Hankey. Also present were Beynet's adviser, Ostrorog, and Humblot's Chief of Staff, Bapst. This wicket proved just as sticky as it looked. In return for a pledge to ask Massigli to agree to the issue of 2,000 rifles to the gendarmerie, Ostrorog was allowed to dispute the legitimacy of the Spears Mission. As Peterson reported to Eden:

Ostrorog developed in detail an attack on this organisation as being unnecessary, as tending to maintain the impression that we were competing with the French and as being at best greatly overstaffed for any legitimate duties which it might have...

Ostrorog roundly alleged that the Spears Mission was "in more than diplomatic contact with the local Governments", and suggested that the Mission's "political officers" simply encouraged the idea of Anglo-French competition. Peterson reported that "when General Spears claimed that these officers were serving the needs of our military authorities, General Holmes, whom I invited to supply confirmation, avoided doing so". In fact, Holmes said that these officers were not helping him and should be absorbed into Middle East Command.³⁸

The impression given was as damaging as it was misleading. As Sir William Croft (who was no Spears sympathiser) had explained to Moyne, the apparent size of the Spears Mission was "responsible for a good deal of misunderstanding". There were over a hundred men involved, but of these, some sixty belonged to the O.C.P. - an Anglo-French co-operative project. Of the rest, over thirty belonged to the Economic section, which was really part of M.E.S.C.† There

* Spears was not invited to participate in the top-drawer discussions between Eden and Massigli on the 23rd, though Peterson was there.

† Middle East Supply Centre, an area of Middle East Command.

were a mere seventeen Political Officers scattered throughout the major towns of the Levant. Their orders were to defer to the local French authorities and to report politico-military matters to Spears. He in turn reported relevant questions - such as local disorders - to Holmes. There was nothing sinister in all this, and Holmes' remarks were thoroughly mischievous. It was only Spears' centralist methods to which Holmes could really object, for whoever controlled these seventeen officers, their reports were clearly necessary as long as the British were ultimately responsible for security in the Levant. In the context of the meeting, however, Holmes had lent himself to the eternal allegation that the Spears Mission was a sinister anti-French organisation.³⁹

Under these circumstances Eastern Department had heard from Ostrorog and Holmes what it wanted to hear, and the 24 August meeting was yet another blow to Spears' hopes of retaining his position in the Levant. As for the top-level talks between Eden and Massigli, and the subsequent toings and froings - from which Spears was excluded - these amounted to a meaningless exchange of generalities, which achieved nothing except to prove that the Foreign Office was anxious to placate Massigli. London had originally disapproved of a strong note from Massigli which made a clear reference to Spears' machinations, but when Massigli stood his ground and threatened "to consider his mission to London a failure", the Foreign Office hastily revised its note and handed Massigli an anodyne recitation of all the old platitudes, together with an interesting pledge to attempt to reduce British organisations in the Levant. Spears, who obviously had no choice, was asked to approve this note.⁴⁰

On the same day, Spears wrote to Eden again: "The meetings we have had with the French...have done nothing to allay my apprehensions concerning their inability to learn [from] past experience", he said, and warned Eden of the Levantines'

extraordinary depth of feeling [against] a treaty. The Syrian President [said] he would rather cut off his right hand than sign one with the French, and the Lebanese that he would rather return to Rachaya...for the rest of his life. It is, therefore, to nurse an illusion to believe that the States will sign one while they feel as they do at present... 41

Unfortunately for Spears, this was precisely the illusion which London was determined to nurse, and its complete distrust of Spears obscured the hard facts in the Levant until he was removed.

On 1 September Spears had a crucial interview with Eden, in which he discovered that his own advice counted for nothing and his personal position was even more precarious than he had thought. Eden stressed that the position between the Levantines and the French "must be properly regularised...by a treaty or some analagous arrangement" and that Spears "must work to this end and not encourage the Syrians or the Lebanese to flout the French on this issue". Eden was in an uncompromising mood. There were too many political officers in the Levant, he continued, and the Spears Mission staff was too large. Spears was therefore told to "pave the way" for a Franco-Levantine treaty and to reduce the Spears Mission with a view to its eventual disappearance.⁴²

Worse was to follow. Eden spoke of his desire to make many new diplomatic appointments in preparation for the post-war period, and announced that Spears' return to the Levant "should be limited to about two months" or a little more. Spears was astonished, and "objected strongly", as he subsequently informed Churchill. But Spears did not realise that his brief return was a compromise arrangement between Churchill and Eden, and that the latter had pressed for Spears' immediate replacement. Spears immediately wrote to Churchill, asking him "to ensure that I am not asked to leave my post until the end of the war with Germany", and reminding the Prime Minister that he had often expressed great satisfaction with Spears' work.⁴³

The chilling reply revealed the full extent of Spears' isolation. The game was up, and in personal terms Churchill's letter was the unkindest cut of all:

I had great difficulty in securing your return...
 You did not take my advice to try to keep your
 Francophobia within reasonable bounds and there
 is no doubt that great irritation is felt by the
 French.... I agree with Anthony that it would be

a good thing to make new arrangements in the Levant [when there is] a more representative French Government....I think you must take it that two or three months will be the limit of your tenure out there.... when the time comes, you will be given opportunity of asking to be relieved instead of being abruptly superseded. This is the best I can do... 44

On that note, Spears made his disillusioned way back to the Levant, carrying instructions which he considered ill-advised, and which he would find highly distasteful to carry out.

* * * *

August 1944 had been a disastrous month for Spears. The Prime Minister, clearly swayed by the Foreign Office case against Spears, had now accused his old comrade of unbridled Francophobia and given him a few months' notice. The Foreign Office itself, bent on what it called restoring the balance, officially favoured the French desire for a post-mandatory treaty and gave Spears the strictest instructions to recommend this to the Syrians and Lebanese. From Spears' point of view, that "prevailing wind" was now approaching gale force. On 26 August de Gaulle himself strode through Paris in triumph. In his epic journey to the Liberation he had left a trail of outwitted rivals and enemies behind him, and it could be only a matter of weeks now before the Allies were obliged to recognise a Gaullist government in Paris. There would then be a proper French authority ready to sign a treaty with the Levant States and, despite the internal chaos in France, determined to re-assert French "rights" in the Levant and elsewhere.

Grimly, Spears proceeded to obey Eden's instructions, "impressing on the local Governments that the conclusion of an agreement with the French is in [Britain's] view not only the best but perhaps the sole method of securing full and unchallenged independence".⁴⁵ On 11 September he conveyed this to the Syrian President, and recited the "advantages" of a treaty with France. The President replied that such a treaty was simply "a licence to plunder". On the 13th Spears saw the Syrian President, Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, and repeated his piece again. The retort was

impressive: in 1919 Britain had betrayed the Arabs, who were just beginning to trust Britain again. London was now throwing away this goodwill on behalf of a country which at a perilous moment had invited the Germans into the Levant. As Spears informed London, "I had not thought...that these men who were my personal friends would have expressed their views with such brutal frankness".⁴⁶

The Syrian attitude was precisely what Spears had always reported it to be. Indeed, throughout August Spears had attempted to tell the Foreign Office that no Syrian or Lebanese leader would consider the idea of a treaty. But Eastern Department still refused to believe this unpalatable evidence that it was out of touch with Levantine attitudes. On 25 September it fastened the blame on Spears' own attitude:

Spears has consistently maintained that the French should be thrown out of Syria. He seems to have carried out his instructions about the necessity for a Syrian-French treaty in such a way that it has been the biggest possible shock to the Syrians.... If we leave Sir E. Spears there, [it is] almost certain that there will never be any understanding between the French and the Levant States. 47

This simplistic obsession continued to blind the Foreign Office to the unswerving attitude of the Levantines and to their increasing capabilities. Obviously Spears found it distasteful to convey London's views, and he did so without visible enthusiasm, but it was ludicrous to suggest that this had determined the Syrian attitude. On the contrary, the fact that Spears himself had to convey this message must have left the Syrians in no doubt that London wanted a Franco-Levantine treaty. Spears' private reflections on this affair are enlightening:

the proposals to sign a treaty which I had been ordered to make were not only not accepted... it was only the fact that I had made them that prevented the States going off the deep end. 48

There was something in this which the Foreign Office never recognised, for the considerable influence which Spears still had enabled him

to moderate the response of the Levantines, who were now in an angry and dangerous mood.

Tension was mounting in the Levant. The French were pressing the Levantines to sign a treaty, and were now claiming London's support in their representations. Spears told the Foreign Office that with the Syrians refusing to budge, Britain was simply getting the worst of both worlds.⁴⁹ At the end of September he found an unexpected ally in Ernest Bevin: "Having made use of these people during the war we are now deserting them and forcing them to accept the French", Bevin roundly told Eden. "It appears to me that we are trying to put the clock back to 1919". The embattled Eden, who was now getting into deep waters, clutched at Eastern Department's straw and suggested to Churchill that Spears had deliberately sabotaged a policy he disliked, and ought to be recalled immediately. But the Prime Minister had developed his own misgivings about recent events. "I am sure we are under no obligation to struggle for an exceptional position for the French", he told Eden, and refused to shorten the period promised to Spears.⁵⁰

Feelings were now running high in the Levant, and there were ominous signs on both sides that the forces of confrontation were preparing themselves. On 30 September Moyne reported to Eden that the French had now officially proposed "to use the [Levant] States as a Transit Base for French troops to the Far East". Paget was alarmed, and Moyne said that in view of

the increasing tension of which I have had ample evidence in my talks with the Syrian and Lebanese [leaders] this week I [agree that] very serious developments...might be expected from the arrival of any considerable number of French troops. 51

At the same time, the Syrians were becoming restive over the continued refusal of the French to transfer the Troupes Spéciales, and Spears had been ordered to stop asking the French to do so. With the Syrian Chamber about to re-convene, this deadlock seemed likely

to cause serious trouble. Churchill personally wired on 3 October to say that he counted on Spears to avert any further crisis in the Levant. Spears promptly replied that he would intervene, using Churchill's good name, despite the fact that the Foreign Office's bewildering changes of policy had seriously damaged Britain's influence and prestige in the Levant.⁵² Spears then told the Foreign Office that the Syrian President had agreed to restrain his colleagues "a little longer", but he expected in return that "Mr. Churchill will obtain for us the army [i.e., Troupes Spéciales] that was promised".⁵³

Early in October Churchill and Eden made a brief stopover in Cairo on their way to Moscow, and the Foreign Secretary had a talk with Moyne and Paget. Moyne - who privately relayed this conversation to Spears - reported the threatening and reactionary attitude now being shown by French officers, and the "hatred of the French" which all the Arab leaders were now showing. Eden's reply stressed French rights in the Levant. Eden himself reported this conversation to Cadogan, stating that the situation "is a stubborn one and full of menace [which] might cause real trouble throughout the Middle East". He added that "further difficulties" had been created by Spears, a view which he had evidently exported from London, for it was certainly not expressed by Moyne or Paget. Finally Eden asked the Foreign Office to telegraph its suggestions.⁵⁴

"We are of course painfully aware how much the Syrians and Lebanese hate the French", Cadogan replied on 15 October. He now recognised that "unless we get an agreement of some sort between them... especially over the location and strength of any French forces... there will sooner or later be a clash which will upset the Middle East". British influence must therefore be used to obtain a Franco-Levantine agreement "while we still have troops in the Levant States". Given the unyielding rejection of any such agreement by the Levantines, Cadogan's answer was hardly adequate - indeed, with the Levantines flatly rejecting any treaty with the French, and the latter bent on reinforcing their mandatory position, satisfactory answers were elusive. The only immediate step which Cadogan suggested concerned the old red herring:

I greatly hope...that you will be able to arrange departure of Spears. He has already mis-managed the situation badly, and is obviously out of sympathy with any policy except throwing the French out. It is true that he has great influence, but he will not use it in the way we require. 55

This recommendation embodied Eastern Department's views* and was the only concrete measure suggested to Eden.

A few days later Churchill, Eden, Moyne and Paget met in Cairo to discuss the deteriorating situation in the Levant. The latest developments, set out by Moyne, were certainly alarming. The recent Arab Congress at Alexandria had prominently endorsed Lebanese independence as asserted by the Riad Solh government, and had passed a resolution that while its member states were free to conclude their own treaties, these should not be detrimental to Arab interests or the Arab movement. Beynet had promptly called on the Lebanese President and stated that these resolutions precluded any Franco-Levantine treaty and France might therefore consider Catroux's independence proclamations invalid! Moreover, the French had just rejected in toto the demand for the transfer of the Troupes Spéciales. Finally, in "the exercise of... his discretion", Paget had already held up four attempts to reinforce French troops in the Levant. There were fears of another coup, Moyne reported, "and the arrival of further French forces would probably cause a clash with disastrous complications". What was to be done, he asked, if the French made a determined and unauthorised bid to disembark troops at Lebanese ports?

The ensuing discussion of this menacing situation was curiously vague and futile. Churchill thought that any French "gatecrashing" was unlikely, but that Paget should have discretion on security grounds to go on refusing French reinforcements. Moyne apparently thought that both France and Britain should move out altogether, but Harvey (accompanying Eden) argued that this would weaken Britain's own mandatory position. Churchill suddenly declared that the Arabs

* On 14 October Hankey minuted that Eden had heard from Churchill who said that he "hesitated to let [Eden] tell Spears to send in his resignation because he was a powerful personality and a crisis was impending, and it seemed very questionable whether this was the moment to make a change. [But] the whole trouble is that, so long as Sir E. Spears is in Beirut, there is sure to be one crisis after another. (I hope the P.M. isn't going to rat on us!)" - FO371/40318/E6370.

had done nothing for Britain "except to revolt...in Iraq". Eden added that he personally had "little faith in Middle East democracies", and advised support for the French if they were "reasonable".⁵⁶ Subsequent reactions at the Foreign Office were, on this occasion, more realistic. As Hankey minuted:

It is not clear why the Prime Minister concludes that the French will not gatecrash the ports... It seems prima facie to be just what they will do, especially if they get to hear of this decision. We really are sitting on a volcano in Beirut. 57

While this imperial volcano continued to smoulder through the autumn of 1944, European priorities were being re-asserted in Paris. De Gaulle's government had been recognised, and Churchill was invited to Paris for Armistice Day celebrations. "We all tremble for the result", wrote Harvey, noting that Churchill was still "violently anti-de Gaulle". These anxieties were soon allayed, for de Gaulle had prepared a magnificent reception for the British Prime Minister. At 11 am on 11 November the two leaders drove past cheering multitudes along the Champs Elysées, which rang with Churchill's name. At the luncheon which followed, de Gaulle himself made "a most flattering speech" in honour of Churchill. It was a great day for Francophiles, as Harvey noted:

Prime Minister's visit to Paris an outstanding success and all our forebodings dispelled. He and [Eden] had an overwhelming reception and its warmth melted the old man as well as de Gaulle.

Churchill himself later informed de Gaulle that 11 November had been "one of the proudest and most moving occasions of my life".⁵⁸

The heady wine was still circulating on 11 November when Churchill and de Gaulle, flanked by their Foreign Ministers, had a general conversation which included the Levant. More detailed talks were held on the 12th between Eden, Cadogan, Bidault and Massigli. Churchill and de Gaulle had been content to agree on the hoary old Iraqi analogy, and their subordinates did not get much further. Speaking as the new Foreign Minister, Bidault said that

France would carry out the independence pledge and also retain her special rights in the Levant. Eden suggested a compromise over the Troupes Spéciales and said that the arrival of French reinforcements would be "unfortunate". Nevertheless he thought that "there was no essential difference" between the British and French views. Both prescribed a Franco-Levantine treaty. 59

These conversations were remarkable for their evasions, omissions and sheer remoteness. The harsh facts were that the Levant States repudiated the French mandate and had ruled out the idea of a treaty; Beynet's alarming statement had not been withdrawn; the Troupes Spéciales had not been transferred; the gendarmerie were still not properly equipped; and French reinforcements were knocking on the door. Eden's mild protests hardly touched all this, and the Levant situation was now, if anything, more menacing than ever, for the French could not have missed the token nature of the British representations. This timidity was perhaps understandable: Eden had endured much to cement Anglo-Gaullist relations and his hour had come round at last. He was not disposed to spoil it for those Middle East democracies in which he did not believe. At best, however, he and Cadogan seriously under-estimated the French resolve to make a comeback in the Levant. A lot more than half-hearted objections were required to deflect the French from this purpose.

This November détente, so welcome to Eden and the Foreign Office, boded ill for the Levant and for Spears himself. On 24 October the Beirut Minister had written again to Churchill:

Few people out here would deny that I have done a good job for England....
 You dubbed me a francophobe [but] the rehabilitation of France, and French policy in the Levant, are two separate and distinct problems....
 It has meant no small sacrifice to take a stand against the French.... whenever their policy was reasonably co-operative I have got on with them; but when our war effort was hampered I have reported it and fought to put things right....
 I do not believe you wish me to be a burnt offering to de Gaulle. All I am asking for is...time to prevent the work I have done being destroyed.... 60

There had been a chance that this appeal might succeed. Churchill had recently told Eden that with a crisis impending in the Levant, it was a bad time to remove a strong personality like Spears.* And the latter had recently satisfied Churchill's personal appeal to keep the Syrians in line for the sake of the war effort. But Armistice Day changed the odds completely. The old France of Churchill's deepest sentiments had materialised before his eyes and saluted him. He had come to terms with de Gaulle, and Spears was to learn that he had asked in vain.

By December 1944, as though delivered from its Spears fixation,[†] Eastern Department at last perceived the enormity of Britain's predicament in the Levant. The alarming evidence had had its effect, and the authentic Levantine voice on the mandate/treaty issue was finally heard. Spears' reports on this matter had been persistently treated as his own views writ large, but on 28 November Hankey heard them from the new Lebanese Chargé d'Affaires, M. Khoury. Hankey was told that "a predominant position for France necessarily meant the infringement of Lebanese independence". Asked if "a few French advisers" were really such a threat, Khoury retorted that "the French could not get away from mandatory mentality or the idea of a secular mission. And when they ran the country, they did not even run it well". Khoury stressed that the Levant States rejected any ex-mandatory treaty with France, and he denied that there was any true analogy with the Anglo-Iraqi treaty.

When Hankey's account of this conversation was circulated, one of the old school declared with some irritation that "the Levant States will have to accept a French position there similar to ours in Iraq". But such imperious decrees were no longer possible. Hankey himself replied on 10 December :

* See p.281 footnote.

† The autumn appointment of Sir M. Peterson as Ambassador to Turkey seems to have removed some of the Spears monomania from Eastern Department.

I think it is going to be a matter of extreme difficulty to get the Levant States and the French to agree on anything....the French will be lucky to get half what we have in Iraq.... As I see it we cannot afford either
 (a) to have the French just chucked out. This would be bad for us in Iraq or Egypt;
 (b) to have the French get more than Arab opinion thinks reasonable...and lead to their saying that we have not kept our promises, as in 1920. This is extremely little for the French;
 or (c) to have a complete breakdown and a resort to arms in which we shall almost inevitably have to intervene forcibly in order to maintain order in the Arab world.... 61

There, at last, was Britain's threefold predicament in the Levant recognised, without illusions, within the Foreign Office.

Unfortunately this clarity of vision had come desperately late in the day. It came even later to Eden, and last of all to Churchill himself. With the Levantines flatly denying the concept of French rights, and the French insisting on far more than the Arab world would tolerate, there was little time left to avert an armed clash. In the Levant, the breathing-space was almost finished, like the time of grace given to Spears himself. Franco-Syrian relations were deteriorating rapidly, and on both sides the period of holding operations was drawing to a close. The reckoning was near.

N O T E S

- 1 Spears tel., 4 December 1943, SPRS III/3a.
- 2 Spears memoir, 9 December 1943, SPRS II/7.
- 3 Duff Cooper report, 17 January 1944, FO371/42132/Z774.
- 4 Duff Cooper, Old Men Forget (1953), pp.314, 322.
- 5 Ibid., p.322f.
- 6 Spears, Fulfilment, p.293.
- 7 PREM 3 421.
- 8 Churchill tel., 10 March 1944, and Spears reply (March, undated), SPRS II/7, and FO954/xv.2.
- 9 Eden minute, 19 March 1944, and Churchill reply, FO954/xv.2.
- 10 Churchill minute, 5 July 1944, PREM 3 423/1.
- 11 Thus, a Foreign Office paper of April 1944, "The Future of the French Colonial Empire", was based on the axiom that "it is strategically essential in Europe...that our policy should aim at maintaining a strong and friendly France" - FO371/41931.
- 12 See FO371/40307, 40312-40318, 40347, in toto.
- 13 Spears Mission paper, "Maintenance of Law and Order in Syria and the Lebanon, July 1944", SPRS II/6.
- 14 FO371/40316/E5031; Spears, Fulfilment, p.204.
- 15 Spears Mission paper, "Maintenance of Law and Order", SPRS II/6.
- 16 Hankey minute, 11 August 1944, FO371/40316/E5031.
- 17 Spears Mission paper, "Maintenance of Law and Order", SPRS II/6.
- 18 Peterson and Cadogan minutes, 27 June 1944, FO371/40312/E3740.
- 19 Eden note, 29 June 1944, PREM 3 423/1.
- 20 Churchill minute, 10 July 1944, PREM 3 423/1.
- 21 Spears, Fulfilment, p.295ff. The essence of Spears' remarkable allegations was confirmed to this writer by a retired senior diplomat who knew Spears and the Chargé d'Affaires, and had personal knowledge of the affair.

- 22 Eden note, 14 July 1944, and Churchill reply, 15 July 1944, PREM 3 423/1.
- 23 F0371/40313; Spears Mission paper, "Maintenance of Law and Order", SPRS II/6.
- 24 Spears tel., 14 July 1944, F0371/40314/E4190.
- 25 F0371/40313/E4259; Duff Cooper tel., 17 July 1944 and Moyne tel., 18 July 1944, F0371/40314/E4229, E4277.
- 26 Spears tels. (434,435), 18 July 1944, F0371/40314/E4278.
- 27 Hankey minute, 19 July 1944, F0371/40314/E4277.
- 28 Peterson minute, 19 July 1944, and Foreign Office tel., 21 July 1944, F0371/40314/E4278.
- 29 Moyne tels., 19 July and 22 July 1944, F0371/40314/E4308, E4366.
- 30 Spears tel., 20 July 1944, F0371/40314/E4344.
- 31 Moyne tel., 23 July 1944, F0371/40316/E5031.
- 32 Duff Cooper tel., 19 July 1944, F0371/40314/E4309.
- 33 Hankey and Baxter minutes, 20 July 1944, F0371/40314/E4309.
- 34 Duff Cooper and Massigli letters, 20 July 1944; Eden reply 3 August 1944: F0371/40315/E4500.
- 35 F0371/40314/E4368.
- 36 Spears letter, 15 August 1944, SPRS II/6.
- 37 Eden letter, 25 August 1944, SPRS II/6.
- 38 Peterson minute, 25 August 1944, F0371/40317/E5258; Record of (same) meeting at the Foreign Office, 24 August 1944, F0371/40347/E5208.
- 39 Croft minute, 26 February 1944, F0921/176; Copy of Spears Mission charter, F0371/40307/E5186.
- 40 See Woodward, iv.298ff. for a detailed account of this long-winded exercise in placatory platitudes.
- 41 Spears letter, 28 August 1944, SPRS II/6.
- 42 Eden minute, 1 September 1944, F0371/40347/E5415.
- 43 Eden minute, 30 July 1944; Churchill minute, 10 August 1944; Eden minute, 20 August 1944; Churchill minute, 31 August 1944, F0954/xv.3. Spears letter, 2 September 1944, SPRS II/7.

- 44 Churchill letter, 3 September 1944, SPRS II/7.
- 45 Eden directive, 1 September 1944, F0371/40347/E5415.
- 46 F0371/40316/E5575, E/5681.
- 47 Foreign Office minute, F0371/40304/E6103.
- 48 Spears Diary, December 1944-January 1945, SPRS I/1.
- 49 F0371/40304/E5887.
- 50 F0371/40304/E6103. Eden minute, 30 September 1944, Churchill minute, 6 October 1944, F0954/xv.3.
- 51 Moyne letter, 30 September 1944, F0371/40317/E6057.
- 52 Churchill tel., 3 October 1944, F0954/xv.3; Spears tel., 4 October 1944, F0371/40317/E6080.
- 53 Spears tel., 4 October 1944, F0371/40317/E6131.
- 54 Moyne letter, 11 October 1944, SPRS II/6; Eden tel., 11 October 1944, F0371/40318/E6370.
- 55 Cadogan tel., 15 October 1944, F0371/40318/E6370.
- 56 Moyne paper, 19 October 1944, SPRS II/6 and F0371/40318/E6652 together with "Notes of a Conference held at Lord Moyne's villa on Friday, 20th October, 1944"; Harvey Diary, 20 October 1944.
- 57 Hankey minute, 2 November 1944, F0371/40318/E6652.
- 58 Harvey Diary, 4, 11, 14 November 1944; Churchill, Second World War, vi. 218-221.
- 59 "Anglo-French Conversations in Paris, 11th and 12th November 1944", F0371/40318/E7627.
- 60 Spears letter, 24 October 1944, SPRS II/7.
- 61 Hankey report, 30 November 1944; Beckett minute, 2 December 1944; Hankey minute, 10 December 1944; F0371/40307/E7501.

Il s n'ont rien appris, ni rien oublie.
Talleyrand

my alliance with the guardians of the Empire
is over, I have set myself in opposition,
the bond is broken, I am a free man.
J.M. Coetzee*

As the Syrian situation deteriorated through the autumn of 1944, Spears was beginning to think that his personal bid to stay on in the Levant might succeed after all. He had made a strong appeal to Churchill in October, and as time passed his hopes grew, encouraged by a copy of Moyne's letter of 1 November to Eden:[†]

we should avoid any action which appears to endorse Beynet's suggestion that the French should go back on their promise of independence.... the French want the excuse of disorder to justify military reoccupation to maintain order. The acid test of French intentions seems to be the Troupes Spéciales and Gendarmerie controversies.... it seems to me that the departure of Spears at this time would be unfortunate.... On the part of the States it might be taken to confirm the suggestion of a change in our policy and provoke an explosion. I think therefore that he should remain at his post until these burning controversies are quenched. 1

As November went by, with its omens of a fresh conflict in the Levant, Spears became convinced that the appeals to Churchill and Eden, and the disturbing developments in the Levant, had secured an extension of his original time-limit.

Assuming that London's silence was a good sign, Spears was unprepared for the worst, as his diary reveals:

I had felt convinced that as since I returned from England all my prognostications had proved to be so accurate, and the refusal of the locals to sign treaties was so unanimous and so well backed by the other Arab states, that Winston and Anthony would feel it was necessary I should stay on.

* Waiting for the Barbarians (1980), p.78.

† It was one of Lord Moyne's last acts. On 6 November 1944 he was shot and killed by Zionist assassins.

But however well Spears had read the Levant situation, he had completely misinterpreted London's silence: "It came therefore as a great shock to me when on November 23rd I received a telegram from Winston suggesting I should resign".²

Perhaps the most galling feature of this telegram was the linking of Spears' recall to the recognition of de Gaulle's provisional government in Paris:

[In September] I indicated certain conditions which I thought should be fulfilled for your return home, in particular the broadening of the de Gaulle government...so that we could recognise it.... This has been achieved and I feel your mission has now been accomplished. I am sure you would be wise to come home now in view of impending general election. Please send your resignation to take effect from December 15th. This will I am sure be thought a natural step to be taken by any member of Parliament...if he desires to stand again. 3

Bitterly, Spears concluded that this message was the upshot of Churchill's visit to Paris, where "he had had his head somewhat turned".⁴ This was a shrewd guess, for Armistice Day had a profound effect upon Churchill, and produced a temporary thaw in his relations with de Gaulle. On returning from Paris, Eden took the opportunity to remind Churchill that Spears' time was up and that the other condition - recognition of the French government - was happily fulfilled. To this Churchill at last agreed, dropping his recent view that Spears was needed in Beirut as long as a crisis was imminent.⁵ Within two months the Prime Minister was to regret his assent.

On 5 December a Foreign Office communiqué announced the resignation of Spears and the appointment of his replacement, Mr Terence Shone (a career diplomat). It was emphasised that Spears' departure meant "no change in British policy" and was "solely due to [his] desire to resume his Parliamentary duties".⁶ In the Levant, however, this sounded hollow and convinced nobody. The French were still withholding the transfer of the *Troupes Spéciales* until the Levantines signed a treaty which they had publicly abominated, the British had been urging the Syrians to be more flexible, the French were plainly bent on reinforcing their military positions in the Levant - and at this precise moment London announced the recall of

the man who embodied Britain's pledge to guarantee the independence of the Levant States.

The Syrian and Lebanese leaders feared the worst. When Spears broke the news personally to the two Heads of State, the Lebanese President "collapsed and wept like a child" and President Quwatli, although "more manly", was visibly upset.⁷ It was not only the indigenous politicians who mourned the departure of Spears. Furlonge recalled the considerable apprehension among the old hands at the British Legation and Consulate, who knew that the move had been "engineered" by those who "blamed Spears personally" for the Levantine imbroglio.⁸ Throughout Beirut and Damascus there were fears that the sudden departure of Spears would be followed by the arrival of an unsympathetic Minister and a change of attitude towards Levantine independence. The inevitable gloating of the local French authorities did nothing to allay these fears. Nor did the arrival of a French cruiser and the despatch of twenty French tanks to Damascus, within days of Spears' departure.⁹

Furlonge and his colleagues were not the only uneasy Britons. Throughout the Middle East British authorities were apprehensive about London's policy. On 23 December Lord Killearn* warned the Foreign Office that it was pursuing two conflicting policies in the Middle East. On one hand it was promoting Arab unity, but on the other it was supporting Zionism in Palestine and "French predominance in Syria". Killearn argued that even lip-service to the French desire for a post-mandatory treaty might be a fatal mistake:

If we support the French [they] are bound to go ahead energetically with the business and if opposition is encountered the chances are that General de Gaulle with his well-known inclination towards drastic methods will use force at least against the Lebanon.... If we allow the French to impose a treaty on the Lebanon by force we shall become involved in a conflict with 90% of the Arab world and sooner or later we shall end by losing the Middle East.... All sorts of nationalist problems are boiling up in the Middle East and even without the millstones of French and Zionists around our neck we shall have quite enough to handle.

* Sir Miles Lampson, now elevated to the peerage as Lord Killearn.

A rather offended Foreign Office told itself that Lord Killearn had misunderstood the position, that it did have a cohesive policy for the Middle East, and that "the departure of the forceful personality of Sir E. Spears" did not mean that London was backsliding in the Levant. But if London had such a policy, it must rank among the best-kept secrets of the Second World War. It was certainly not evident to Killearn, who was probably the most experienced and prominent British diplomat in the Middle East. London's reply was unconvincing, and amounted to an insistence on reconciling the irreconcilable. On 5 January 1945 the Foreign Office repeated to Killearn its support for Arab unity, effectively admitted that no firm decisions had been made on Palestine, and stated that there was no intention of pressing the Levant States to sign away their independence. But London did want the Levantines "to reach agreement with the French as to the nature of their future relations". Admitting that de Gaulle might try to use force and that this would create a worse crisis than November 1943, London nevertheless argued that

the possibility of it is precisely the reason why an agreement seems to us so necessary. We have not said that the Syrians and Lebanese must concede everything.... But they are not facing the need for an agreement at all and do not even know what the French proposals are.

This sounded impressive enough, but the Foreign Office conspicuously failed to add that London itself had no knowledge of the French proposals! London was therefore urging the Levantines to explore an agreement with the French on the exceedingly dubious assumption that French proposals would not involve any "real derogation" from the States' independence. ¹⁰

In the light of recent events and attitudes in the Levant, this assumption was hopelessly naïve, and it was soon evident that Levantine instincts on the nature of French proposals were more realistic. In fact, if the Foreign Office really believed its own reply to Killearn, it was indulging in sheer self-delusion. For Eastern Department had recently had a fruitless discussion with the slippery Ostrorog on the very question of French proposals. Baxter

and Hankey had given Ostrorog "several chances to say what the French intended the treaties should contain, but he did not give any indication". Ostrorog had indeed been evasive. "These things could not be hurried in the East", he had breezed. "The French would wait till the States saw the need for such agreements". This remark proved to be a euphemism worthy of Helleu, and one commentator shrewdly minuted: "He may wish to wait also until British troops have cleared out". And yet, despite this completely unsatisfactory session with Ostrorog, London was continuing to commend to the Levantines an agreement with the French.¹¹ By lending its good offices too readily, the Foreign Office was giving fresh hostages to fortune in a region where, as Killearn had remarked, Britain had quite enough to handle already. It was also arousing genuine fears in the Levant of another sellout of 1919 proportions.

Rumours of a sellout mobilised Spears in all his old style during the final days of his Ministry. Once informed of his dismissal, he removed the diplomatic gloves. "From that time on", he recalled without undue modesty,

I considered myself a free man and began to make very open speeches. They were really very good speeches and made a profound impression.... This counter-acted the French propaganda that it was owing to their efforts that I had been recalled. 12

At the same time Spears tried to get some helpful public statement from London to discourage the general interpretation of his recall. On 1 December he sent 70th birthday congratulations to Churchill and asked for an emphatic statement that there would be no change in British policy. But the Prime Minister sought Eden's advice and Spears' request was denied.*¹³

* The final chapter of Spears' memoirs does not reveal the story of his dismissal. This may well have been the express wish of General Spears, whose esteem for Churchill somehow survived. On the other hand it is stated in the Editorial Note to Fulfilment that the final chapter was completed by his wife after the death of Spears in 1974. In its final form, Fulfilment simply follows the old official communiqué, stressing Spears' wish to resume his Parliamentary duties as the reason for his "resignation". But any desire not to open old wounds had already been frustrated by the publication of Woodward's Official History in 1975. His account tends to canonise the Foreign Office version of events and, as history, it is both slanted and inadequate. I have therefore attempted to provide a more broadly-based and balanced account of the affair, from its origins.

A few days before his departure Spears was infuriated by a report on his "recall" in the Palestine Post, which was quoting the Times, and he fired off one last telegram to the Foreign Office:

I must ask you to issue an immediate explanation that the word "recall" was incorrectly used.... If [the Levantines] feel that they have been misled about my resignation so they will feel that they have been fooled by promise that there would be no change of policy.... Local French can be relied on to exploit the Times statement [and Arab suspicion] that your real object was...to hand them over to the French will become a certainty. Against this fate they are prepared to go down fighting. 14

This request was also denied, and Eden's subsequent instructions to the new man, Shone, showed that London was still motivated by a very different set of priorities:

French and British interests in the Levant States are not fundamentally opposed, so long as the French Government follow a policy in accordance with their obligations and promises.... There is however a long heritage of bad relations between France and Great Britain in the Levant.

It was this Anglo-French discord which concerned Eden above all else. "I am anxious to bring this state of affairs to an end", he told Shone. "[It has] had a disproportionate influence on Anglo-French relations".¹⁵ With this priority in mind, Eden had no intention of issuing any statement which minimised the mileage he hoped to obtain with the French through the departure of Spears.

Amid scenes of great emotion Spears left the Levant, deeply moved by the "unanimous reaction" of the Levantines:

Quite regardless of consequences they vied with each other in giving me the most loyal signs of affection ... A street had already been named after me in Beirut. Damascus followed suit. [I was] made a citizen of the Lebanon.... [In Damascus] I was also given a great banquet in the Serail, which had only been used twice before for this purpose, once when a dinner was given to Lord Allenby, and once to King Feisal. The President...contrary to all protocol, attended and conferred on me the highest Syrian order, the Ommayed with diamonds. The Lebanese also conferred their highest decoration on me.

Showered with honours and beautiful gifts, Spears left Beirut and was escorted to the Palestine border by the Lebanese.¹⁶

The Scourge of the Francophiles had finally been removed, but as the esteemed champion of the Levant States he was by no means eliminated from public affairs. Having once been known to the House of Commons as the Member for Paris, he was returning to Westminster to play the Member for Beirut and Damascus. In the meantime he made his intentions perfectly clear. Killearn was soon reporting from Cairo that Spears was giving the censors a headache with his controversial press interviews:

The gist of [it] is that Arab and Moslem world opinion is waiting to see whether British will keep their word to Levantine States or whether in the interests of good relations with French they will force the States to make concessions...

"No doubt the line Sir E. Spears will take in Parliament", Hankey commented. "It was grossly improper", declared Butler, Peterson's replacement.¹⁷ But Spears, who was feeling "a bitter sense of grievance at Anthony's and Winston's behaviour" in sacking him, was in no mood to defer to Foreign Office proprieties.¹⁸

On 24 December 1944 Spears opened his campaign in England with an interview published in the Sunday Express. Confessing himself amazed at certain British press remarks about handing Syria back to the French, Spears said that this would amount to the rape of the Levant States. "In the name of what principle that we are fighting for can a treaty be imposed on them?", he asked:

The Arab nations...are well disposed and friendly to us today, but they will not remain so if we allow any members of their group to be bullied. If we forfeit their friendship, it will be lost for good.... If we held the ring while pressure was put on friendly little people, then indeed the outcry would know no bounds.

There were wider dangers, Spears added: "Should the Arabs lose faith in us over...the Levant, then the chances of an extremely serious crisis arising in Palestine will increase immensely".¹⁹

Having publicly provided this taste of what was to come, Spears wrote to Churchill and served notice of his intentions in Parliament: "Now that I am returning to the House of Commons, I

shall feel it my duty to do all I can to ensure that British policy towards the Middle East, an area most vital to the Empire, does not develop on lines which will destroy all that those of us who have been upholding British interests there have been able to achieve".²⁰

Both in and beyond Parliament, Spears was as good as his word. On 17 January, in a well-publicised speech to the Royal Empire Society, he aired his fundamental formula: Britain's position in the Middle East was crucial to the Empire, and this position could not be maintained without the goodwill and co-operation of the Arabs; but their friendship could be forfeited if London supported the French in Syria or the Zionists in Palestine. Thus, given the unmistakable attitude of the French, it was both right and necessary to defend the independence of the Levant States, which Britain had guaranteed in 1941.²¹ As for the friendship of France, which some thought more important than that of the Arabs, Spears insisted that this could not be acceptable at the expense of the Levant States. De Gaulle, he alleged, was asking Britain to tear up a "solemn guarantee" to Syria and Lebanon in return for a comprehensive Anglo-French treaty. This was unacceptable, because

there are vast British interests in the Middle East, whereas those of the French are slight and concerned mainly with prestige. Should French policy...lead to her elimination from the Middle East, she might smart, but the Metropolis would be no worse off.

If, on the other hand, Britain "forfeited the confidence of the Arab world", the Empire would be finished. Therefore, "the greatest possible goodwill towards France would not justify us in running the risk".²²

While it was too easy for an Englishman to dismiss French interests in the Levant as slight, Spears' remarks were to receive partial confirmation from an unexpected quarter - de Gaulle himself. In his memoirs, the General later admitted that Parisian reactions to the Syrian crisis of May-June 1945 had disappointed him. The French had been apathetic on the whole, and where they showed any strong feelings, these tended to be directed against de Gaulle,

who was blamed for allowing an ugly crisis to mar Anglo-French relations in the year of Allied victory. Ironically, as de Gaulle recalled, most French diplomats and politicians took the view that the friendship of Great Britain was more important than peripheral French interests in the Levant. In this respect, the Quai d'Orsay and the Consultative Assembly in Paris adopted a set of priorities which closely resembled those of Whitehall.²³ In January, however, London could not have known that metropolitan France would be so relatively unconcerned about the Levant.

What could be foreseen in January 1945 was that the Gaullists were bent on securing some form of continuing French privilege in the Levant, that the Syrians were utterly opposed to this, and that the British were likely to be caught in the middle of an ugly clash. All this was becoming painfully obvious to Shone, the unlucky new Minister to Syria and the Lebanon, who found that he had no room to manoeuvre, and that Eden's instructions amounted to a demand for the miraculous. It was idle to say, as Eden had said to Shone, that Anglo-French interests in the Levant were harmonious so long as the French abided by their obligations and promises. The whole drift of French behaviour in the Levant had been to dismiss or whittle away these promises. This attitude was bound to lead to a further Anglo-French collision unless the British backed away from their own pledge. The Syrians, well aware of Britain's need to retain the goodwill of the Arab world, refused to be intimidated into a treaty with France, leaving London the stark choice of honouring or evading its guarantee of Syrian independence in the event of Franco-Syrian hostilities.

This menacing situation impressed and alarmed Shone, and his wires to London destroyed any comfort the Foreign Office may have derived from the dismissal of Spears. As Furlonge recalled, Shone "was soon convinced that Spears had been right in maintaining that to insist on a special position for the French was no longer realistic".* The dismissal of Spears had therefore changed nothing.

* Furlonge was Shone's chief aide in both Syria and Lebanon.

His successor was rapidly convinced that it was too late for the French in the Levant, and that "the only thing to do was to support the Syrians".²⁴ Thus the Foreign Office found that, while the Gaullists' scapegoat had been removed and while his successor's reports avoided polemical excesses, the Levantine problem was as bad as ever. There could be no mistaking the drift of Shone's telegrams, beneath the man's professional restraint. At the beginning of January he reported that the Syrian and Lebanese Ministers were manifesting an "even harder" attitude than he had expected. A week later he stated that this attitude made it extremely difficult to make any progress towards a Franco-Syrian understanding without forfeiting the confidence of the Levant States.²⁵

Such reports - emanating from a career diplomat not given to espousing causes - had a sobering effect in London. The point was further underlined by Moyne's successor, Sir E. Grigg. On 23 January, following a brief visit to the Levant, he sent a grim report to Eden. "I feel certain", he said pointedly, "that you... realise what a terribly difficult job Terence Shone has to carry out the instructions which he has been given [because] no man can reconcile the irreconcilable".²⁶

The implications of this deteriorating situation were not lost on Churchill, who had reluctantly agreed to remove Spears in the name of improved relations in the Levant, and was currently enduring the outspoken reproaches of his old comrade in the corridors of Parliament.* Churchill had long resisted Foreign Office complaints about Spears, and by the end of January 1945 he suspected that his unpleasant decision had achieved nothing. His resentment surfaced when he saw an anti-Spears remark passing from Eden to Duff Cooper, and he rounded on his Foreign Secretary:

To meet your personal wishes and the Foreign Office prejudice against Sir Louis Spears I have agreed to his recall.... At the same time, it is not true or just to lay the burden, as

* On one such occasion, as Spears recorded, "I told [Churchill] I had been treated shamefully and that it was particularly objectionable that he should thus have dealt with me because I...was such an old friend. He either misunderstood this or pretended to". - Spears Diary extract, SPRS I/1.

some seem inclined to do, for the position in the Levant upon him. The fact that Mr. Shone takes up exactly, or very nearly, this attitude is impressive.... The whole affairs in the Levant were imperilled by de Gaulle's attempted coup d'état at the end of 1943. I object extremely to the theme on which the Foreign Office has now apparently set to work, that all the troubles have arisen through Spears' excessive championship of the Lebanese and Syrian interests. This among other things is a reflection on me. 27

The current realities in the Levant were certainly a reflection on the platitudinous policy which Churchill and Eden had recited for the past four years. The inadequacy of their formula was at last becoming evident to them. Eden, finally admitting a dilemma which Spears had endeavoured to explain to him in 1943, minuted that "if the Syrians won't have a treaty we cannot compel them to it".²⁸ The shortcomings of their old formula were now worrying both Churchill and Eden. In mid-February, on their return from Yalta, they had a long talk with Syria's President Quwatli in Cairo.

In a preliminary discussion, attended by Grigg, Cadogan and Shone, Quwatli told Eden that although the Syrians wanted peace and quiet, they had been greatly provoked and might well revolt. The French were still hanging onto the *Troupes Spéciales* and insisting on a privileged position in the Levant, which was a standing provocation, as Syria preferred the Arab bloc and refused to be part of some French imperial system. Churchill then arrived and insisted that the Syrians must not "throw the French out altogether", but Quwatli replied that while the French were welcome to continue with their hospitals and schools, no privileged position could be accepted. Syria could not be regarded as a French sphere of influence, the President pointedly stressed.²⁹

This had a telling effect upon Churchill, perhaps because it echoed a point of view which was being stressed by both the Soviet Union and the United States. Flourishing their respective anti-colonial myths (and despite their own flagrant double standards), both Moscow and Washington took a dim view of privileged positions being granted to former imperial and mandatory powers, and of late they had

made it clear that their recognition of Syrian and Lebanese independence did not include any recognition that the Levant was primarily a French sphere of influence.³⁰ In any case, within ten days of meeting Quwatli, Churchill addressed the House of Commons once more on the Levant question. This time, despite some familiar phrases, it was obvious that he had made a significant adjustment to his view of French privilege:

His Majesty's Government have made it clear that they would never seek to supplant French influence...in the Levant States. We are determined also to respect the independence of these States and to use our best endeavours to preserve a special position for France.... We hope that it may be possible for the French to preserve that special position....

However, I must make it clear that it is not for us alone to defend by force either Syrian or Lebanese independence or French privilege.... Too much must not be placed therefore upon the shoulders of Great Britain alone. We have to take note of the fact that Russia and the United States have recognised and favour Syrian and Lebanese independence, but do not favour any special position for any other foreign country. 31

The French could hardly have missed the significance of this statement, especially as it coincided with M. Bidault's visit to London at the end of February. Nevertheless the Gaullists appeared to be impervious to external appeals, hints or pressures, and to be labouring under the delusion that time had stood still in the Levant since 1936. Having told Duff Cooper that the Levant was still a French responsibility, Bidault came to London and told Eden that France only wanted a position in Syria comparable to that of Britain in Iraq.³² This breath-taking blindness to the limited possibilities in the Levant was to prove disastrous. It was all the more astonishing, as Kirk has pointed out, at a time when "French leader-writers were appreciatively recording that the Egyptian and Iraqi nationalists were already agitating for the revision of their pre-war treaties with Britain".³³ If that was so, how did a discredited France expect to impose new limitations upon the triumphant nationalists in the Levant?

This was clearly not the sort of question the Gaullists were asking themselves. In fact, it was precisely because France had been dishonoured and tainted that these tortured patriots felt compelled to re-assert the power and prestige of France in all her old imperial haunts, as well as in Europe. Thus, despite all the nationalist ferment in the Middle East, despite all that had changed in the Levant, the Gaullists were bent on imposing a political anachronism in Syria and the Lebanon. Insofar as they had noticed the Levantine attitude, as they had been forced to do in 1943, the French had drawn all the wrong conclusions. Now that France itself was liberated, they were eager to demonstrate that she was once again a force to be reckoned with. For many of the French within the Levant, it was time to satisfy all the burning resentment they had nursed since the humiliation of the Lebanese crisis. As one such officer had told Richard Pearse:

I am leaving the Lebanon.... But we will come back, and come back not with a soft Mandate, but as a colonising power. We will show those bloody Arabs who are their bosses.... And we will give the English a lesson in colonial rule. 34

For de Gaulle himself - and there seems to be no escaping this conclusion - it was time to activate his impossible dream of resurrecting every square metre of the French Empire.

As the helmsman of France, de Gaulle was on a collision course with the Syrians and the British in the Levant, and in the spring of 1945 he confirmed this course and rang for full steam. If the first major sign of this was the intransigence of Bidault, the second was the prolonged absence of Beynet from the Levant. Early in March, Shone had actually persuaded the Syrians and Lebanese to enter into exploratory negotiations with the French over outstanding differences. Beynet had promptly retired to Paris, ostensibly to receive instructions and draft French terms. He was to have returned in a fortnight, but - as if imitating Catroux's tactics - he was still in Paris on 6 May. On that fateful day, a French cruiser arrived at Beirut and the first French reinforcements began to disembark.³⁵

London had made several vain attempts to convince de Gaulle that there could be no more disastrous coincidence than the arrival of French troops at a time when French terms were being communicated to the Levantines, who could hardly fail to see this as a form of pressure. These counsels were rejected by de Gaulle. On 30 April, Duff Cooper's pleas to this effect fell on deaf ears, and merely provoked a paranoid retort about British intentions. This greatly alarmed the Foreign Office, and Churchill was asked to intervene to prevent the arrival of French ships and troops - precisely the sort of "gatecrashing" which he had dismissed as unlikely in October 1944. The Prime Minister, at first unwilling to appeal to de Gaulle (on the grounds that he would only receive "some insulting answer"), was finally persuaded to make the effort. Having reiterated that Britain had no designs on the Levant, Churchill offered to withdraw British troops from the Levant as soon as France concluded an amicable treaty with the Levant States, but warned:

If you reinforce your troops at this moment the Levant States, who have been waiting for treaty proposals for some time past, may well suppose that you are preparing a settlement to be concluded under duress. This might...poison the atmosphere for the negotiations you are about to begin.

The response was as predicted. Asserting that France merely wished to secure her cultural, economic and strategic interests, de Gaulle alleged that "this matter could already have been cleared up, if the [Levantines had not gathered] that they could get out of any engagements by relying on your support against us. The presence of your troops and the attitude of your agents assisted them".³⁶

As if it were any compensation, de Gaulle added that for Churchill's sake he had issued a communiqué that Beynet was returning to the Levant immediately to negotiate. But since this coincided with the despatch of three battalions aboard French cruisers, it merely assured that the simultaneous arrivals of terms and troops would be regarded as blatant coercion. Indeed, the Gaullists, who had evidently learned nothing useful from the Lebanese crisis, had clearly decided on a little old-fashioned persuasion.

Their tactics backfired completely. On 18 May Beynet met Syrian and Lebanese Ministers in Damascus and presented his optimistic list of French requirements. Apart from extensive commercial and cultural concessions, these included transport facilities to the Far East, military bases, naval bases and continued authority over the Troupes Spéciales! Beynet was virtually asking for a return to 1936, and even as he did so more French troops were arriving at Beirut. Furiously rejecting the French terms as "absolutely incompatible with...sovereignty and independence", the Levantines broke off the negotiations as a protest against the French reinforcements.³⁷

Thereafter the situation rapidly deteriorated into open conflict. A general strike was proclaimed in Damascus and Beirut and once more the shops were shuttered, while anti-French demonstrations quickly led to rioting and a savage reaction from French troops. A brief lull in hostilities was followed by a greater explosion of violence in the Syrian cities of Homs, Hama and Damascus. French convoys were attacked, vehicles ambushed and burned, and beleaguered French troops had to beat off determined assaults. In Damascus the French gradually gained the upper hand and drove their adversaries back into the cover of public buildings, including the Syrian Parliament and police headquarters. Whereupon Oliva-Roget, the somewhat unstable French commander, ordered the general shelling and bombardment which resulted in terrible civilian casualties and the destruction of Parliament, a mosque, and many houses. As in 1943, the behaviour of French troops was brutal and undisciplined. On one occasion, Furlonge and Shone desperately took cover while Shone's official residence was shot up. One bullet passed between the two men.³⁸

All this provided the sort of publicity which the French simply could not afford, and the world press had a field day during the Syrian crisis. The shelling of Damascus and the wild allegations of Oliva-Roget, who thought he detected a vast army of British

agents in disguise, were only the loudest of many sensational headlines, most of which condemned the French in some way. This greatly embarrassed French delegates at the United Nations Conference at San Francisco, where the concept of Trusteeships was being aired as a replacement for the discredited League of Nations mandates. If anyone needed a reminder that mandates had been cynically abused, it was provided by the news that the French were shelling Damascus. Delegates from the Arab states lost no time in alleging that the French were trying to batter the Levant States into submission, and the French were roundly condemned for contradicting their own high-sounding case for Trusteeships to succeed former mandates. In Washington, the French were handed a stiff request to review their Syrian activities in the light of United Nations principles.³⁹

Meanwhile the shelling, bombardment and wild machine-gunning went on in the streets of Damascus and other Syrian cities. French encampments in outlying areas were besieged, and in Deraa - near the Jebel Druse - a Syrian force overwhelmed and captured the 500 strong French garrison.⁴⁰ In Damascus itself, the shelling continued through the night of 30-31 May, after a brief armistice on the afternoon of the 30th for the evacuation of British and American communities. And during all this time, the British 9th Army had not moved - as even de Gaulle admits: "the British had not stirred. In Cairo, [Grigg and Paget] had remained impassive. In the Levant, General Pilleau, commanding the British Ninth Army, had made no move".⁴¹ Yet the British were now under great pressure to intervene. Furlonge, on Shone's behalf, had to make daily visits to President Quwatli, which became increasingly unpleasant as Britain continued to do nothing. Quwatli bitterly declared that Damascus was being destroyed while the British failed to keep their promise.⁴²

On 30 May Shone urged London to intervene and stop "this ruthless bombardment of an open city", and sent on Quwatli's own appeal to Churchill, who had promised that Syria would not be coerced into a treaty with France. Paget was also urging that he should

assume command of all troops in the Levant, since Beynet could not or would not restrain Oliva-Roget. On the evening of 30 May, Shone sent another wire - a personal appeal to Eden:

The French have instituted nothing short of a reign of terror in Damascus. Apart from indiscriminate shelling, their troops, black and white, are behaving like madmen, spraying the streets with machine-gun fire.... They do not spare vehicles flying the British flag...[*]

It is useless to appeal to the French authorities who are clearly out to win a merciless war on the Syrians. I have often reported before on the chaotic French disorganisation here, and even if they had control of their troops they cannot or will not exercise it.

[A brief armistice] is now almost over, and there is no doubt that the horror will begin again. But even during the alleged armistice there has still been firing by the French...

...At an interview I have just had with the Syrian President...there were the first signs of something like animosity to us. That will inevitably increase hourly if we fail to intervene, and will surely spread throughout the...Middle East.

I can only put this to you and implore His Majesty's Government to allow the Commander-in-Chief to intervene without delay. 43

In London, Churchill's previous insistence that British troops alone should not be expected to police the Levant dispute - not without Washington's public support, at least - was being overcome by the sheer extremity of the situation. Shone's messages convinced the Cabinet that British forces would have to intervene. Straight after this evening decision, Churchill and Eden informed Massigli that orders were being issued to Paget, and President Truman was to be asked to support this decision. The Frenchman, striving to salvage what he could of Anglo-French relations, pleaded that British intervention should be explained in terms of protecting lines of communication to the Far East war. Churchill then wired to Truman that he was prepared to order Paget to intervene in Syria to restore order and to protect Allied communications. He asked for the President's support before he took this final step.⁴⁴

* Furlonge himself, in a British vehicle, was fired on by the French.

By noon on the 31st no reply had come in from Truman, and Churchill (with Cabinet approval) ordered Paget to intervene by assuming command of all Allied troops in the Levant and ordering the French to retire to barracks. At the same time the Prime Minister sent a message to de Gaulle, and this was read to the House of Commons at 3.45 pm by Eden:

In view of the grave situation which has arisen between your troops and the Levant States, and the severe fighting which has broken out, we have with profound regret ordered the Commander-in-Chief Middle East to intervene...in the interests of the security of the whole Middle East, which involves communications for the war against Japan. In order to avoid collision between British and French forces, we request you immediately to order the French troops to cease fire and to withdraw to their barracks.

Unfortunately this message - which Duff Cooper declined to deliver personally - did not reach de Gaulle until about 5 pm.* Naturally the Frenchman regarded this as a further insult added to the "insolence" of Churchill's telegram, and he later claimed that the delay had been meant to prevent him from announcing a retort that fighting had already stopped in Damascus.⁴⁵

This was unlikely, since London had no reason to believe that anything had changed for the better in Syria. In Paris, however, de Gaulle had taken a quick and highly unpalatable decision around midnight on the 30th. Having received Massigli's urgent report of his interview with Churchill and Eden, de Gaulle somehow mastered his initial furious instinct to offer resistance to Paget's soldiers. As the dismayed Bidault pleaded with de Gaulle to avoid the unthinkable, the General himself also considered the inadequacy of his small forces in Syria, and reluctantly deferred to his Foreign Minister. He allowed Bidault to contact Beynet, instructing him to order a cease-fire and the maintaining of all French positions as they stood. At some stage on the 31st, Massigli was duly informed, but time had run out for the unlucky French Ambassador. The Cabinet decision was taken, Paget was unleashed, and the House of Commons was informed before Massigli had time to see Eden.⁴⁶

* It was sent at 2.40 pm with the instruction "Please deliver... immediately". - Foreign Office tel., 31 May 1945, F0954/xv.4.

In any case, de Gaulle's claim that fighting had already ceased in Damascus is dubious. Shelling had been resumed on the evening of the 30th, and there was no respite the next morning. If Beynet really did accept Bidault's instructions on the telephone, as de Gaulle claims, then the situation in Damascus on the 31st seems to vindicate the local British view that Oliva-Roget's men were virtually uncontrollable. Radio Levant, on the evening of the 31st, implied that the French forces had been fighting during the day and were just concluding their operations. This French source also admitted that there were still areas where Beynet's writ did not run. De Gaulle himself admitted this in a Paris communiqué. Associated Press, evading French measures to suppress all outside journalism, reported that fighting had continued "all during the night...through to 4 pm today [31st] ". Thus, the subsequent chronological claims made by de Gaulle and Oliva-Roget, in somewhat theatrical press conferences, were of little value. Given that French forces were still being successfully defied in many areas, and in a few cases had been captured or besieged, nothing short of outside intervention could have prevented another lapse into hostilities. For the British, who had the only immediately available troops in the area, the stark choice was to enforce a cease-fire throughout the Levant or to allow the French to bludgeon Syria into submission.

It is significant that de Gaulle's account makes no mention of the appalling realities of the shelling and shooting, the many hundreds of civilian casualties, or the fact that Truman's approval of Churchill's intervention was announced at a Washington press conference on 31 May.⁴⁷ This is not to deny that Britain's anxiety for her own standing in the Arab world was a strong determinant in the decision to intervene. But Churchill clearly kept out of the conflict for as long as possible, and when he did move it was not only to save the British image in the Middle East. It must also be said that what the French were doing was a public affront to every civilised

value for which the Western Allies were supposed to be fighting. Even if we allow Churchill, Eden and Truman no spark of humanitarian motivation, the Atlantic Charter powers could hardly do nothing while the newspapers screamed that the French were shelling and bombing the urban population of Syria, whose independence had been recognised by all the Allies and guaranteed by Britain. De Gaulle's highly selective account avoids the fact that Truman supported Churchill's decision despite America's deep-seated suspicions of British imperialism; it also implies that Churchill should have allowed the French to carry on their barbaric work, which was by no means finished when Paget intervened. De Gaulle, of course, tries to pass off Oliva-Roget's behaviour as a conventional military operation, but the contemporary press did not fail to juxtapose this ruthless repression with France's own experience of Nazi domination, and her claim to a so-called "civilising mission" in the Levant.* ⁴⁸

By the evening of 31 May, in anticipation of Paget's arrival, Beynet had prevailed upon Oliva-Roget to observe a cease-fire and to hold existing positions in Damascus and other cities in Syria. Paget, having communicated his intentions and requests to Beynet on the 31st, arrived in Beirut the following day with a formidable escort of tanks and combat vehicles, whose gunners held firing positions as they passed French troops. This "outrageous military display", as de Gaulle called it, reflected Paget's consistently low opinion of Oliva-Roget's troops, whose attitude and intentions had exasperated the British Commander-in-Chief for the past eighteen months. At Beynet's residence, Paget personally repeated his demand that French troops should return to their barracks under his orders, and that British troops should henceforth be responsible for keeping order in Damascus and elsewhere. He added menacingly that if any French troops opened fire, their barracks would be bombarded by the British. "No French soldier will go out into the streets without my authorisation", he concluded. ⁴⁹

* Spears publicly condemned Oliva-Roget as a Vichyite who had fought on the wrong side in Syria in 1941: his "contribution to the war effort, as far as we have experienced it, is therefore to have taken up arms against us in our hour of dire need"; he had since been "promoted by de Gaulle". - Sunday Express, 10 June 1945.

Beynet smoothly replied that all this was unnecessary, since a cease-fire was already in effect, and he declined to formally accept an ultimatum from Paget. Nevertheless, British troops were free to come and go as they liked, of course. This attitude reflected the instructions which de Gaulle had cabled, instructions which sounded firm but allowed Beynet to discreetly avoid armed confrontation. While Beynet was told not to tolerate any disarming of French troops, and to maintain French positions "where English troops do not in fact appear", he was also given discretion to move French troops and to allow the British to patrol where they would. As a result, though Beynet continued his face-saving device of refusing to accept the authority of Paget, French troops gradually retired to barracks and later moved out of the Syrian cities to outlying encampments. British units occupied major buildings and strongpoints throughout the Levant, and entirely took over the maintenance of public order.⁵⁰

With these developments, the street war in Syria gave way to a war of words in Paris and London. On 2 June, de Gaulle gave "the most remarkable Press Conference of his career", as a seasoned journalist put it.⁵¹ It was his public retaliation for the Churchill telegram in the Commons, his compensation for lack of support from the French press and his justification of French actions in Syria. With great rhetorical skill and considerable bias, de Gaulle took his audience through the sorry saga of Anglo-French relations in the Levant since 1917. Arriving at 1941, he declared that "Free France....taking with her Great Britain" had rescued Syria from Vichy treachery only to inherit fresh British intrigues. This "mass of complications" was caused by "a considerable number of agents on the spot". Nevertheless, de Gaulle asserted, France tried to ignore these machinations, complete the independence of the Levant States, and subordinate her local anxieties to the all-important war effort in Europe. Thus omitting the Lebanese crisis altogether, de Gaulle came to the current flare-up, which he attributed to ill-disposed groups in possession of British weapons. He had, however, ordered a cease-fire on 30 May to avoid the "monstrous absurdity" of Anglo-French hostilities. Thus, Churchill's publicised telegram of the 31st "did not change

anything and it will not change anything".

De Gaulle concluded this brilliant litany of half-truths with a call for all the Allies to discuss the status of the entire Arab world together, thus raising such questions as Egypt and Palestine as well as Syria, and questioning the immense British hold on the Middle East. In the question-time which followed, de Gaulle stated that Spears "represented his country at Beirut for three years. It is difficult for me to imagine that...he followed any policy but that of his Government".⁵²

As a footnote to this performance, de Gaulle summoned Duff Cooper to a stormy interview on 4 June. "He could not have been more stiff if he had been declaring war", the British Ambassador recalled, noting that de Gaulle seemed convinced that the British were about to complete France's long-prepared eviction. Bitter and hostile, de Gaulle dismissed the Englishman with a prophetic vow: "We are not, I admit, in a position to open hostilities against you at the present time. But you have insulted France and betrayed the West. This cannot be forgotten".⁵³ In a later decade, General de Gaulle remembered only too well.

On the other side of the Channel, Spears had plunged into the fray. On 27 May he accused de Gaulle of asking Britain to tear up a solemn promise to the Levant States. In Parliament he gleefully assailed the embattled Eden, demanding to know if the Levantines were "expected to negotiate while the French are shelling them, and should not French withdrawal precede negotiations?". In June, responding to de Gaulle's public allegations, Spears published another article, giving an alternative version of how France acquired and enforced its mandate in the Levant. He went on to describe de Gaulle's account of British intrigue as an "absurd accusation", as the French had brought trouble on themselves by their domineering and corrupt behaviour in the Levant.⁵⁴

Churchill himself, stung by de Gaulle's public attacks and his remarks to Britain's Ambassador, answered the accusations at

some length in a speech to the Commons on 5 June. Stating that the situation had got completely out of hand, and citing stiff casualty figures, the Prime Minister said that it was "a pity", if de Gaulle really did order a cease-fire, that London was not informed immediately. On the other hand, he pointed out, Damascus was still being shelled on the 31st, whatever de Gaulle said. For good measure Churchill took up the torch for Spears, "my honourable and gallant friend", and reminded the House that Spears, who had a long and brave record in Anglo-French military liaison, had helped de Gaulle to London in 1940. General Spears had certainly not been recalled from Beirut to please de Gaulle, Churchill insisted.⁵⁵

These sentiments must have pleased Spears as much as they dismayed the Foreign Office, which was desperately looking to end such bitter exchanges and to defuse the tension over the Levant. But, as de Gaulle remarked, Anglo-French relations "remained in the refrigerator" and bad feeling spilled over into petty public snubs. De Gaulle was due to confer French decorations on some high-ranking British officers, but he cancelled the ceremony and simultaneously ordered his own Generals not to accept the decorations which Britain was about to confer on them. And at the 18 June parade, when de Gaulle spotted Lady Spears' ambulance, he ordered it out of the procession and demanded the repatriation of its British members. The Spears Ambulance had cared for thousands of French wounded on many fronts, but that name, and some little Union Jacks on the vehicles, were too much for de Gaulle.⁵⁶

The last big salvo in this war of words and personalities was fired by de Gaulle on 19 June, during the debate on Syria in the Consultative Assembly.* Britain, he charged, aimed "to polarise upon

* A minor fusillade of emotive accusations was fired at a Paris press conference on the 7th by Oliva-Roget, who had been sent home by Beynet. The embattled General proceeded to blame all his woes on the British: they had threatened to shell his troops; they had made no allowance for his acts of "self defence" after Syrian insurgents started all the shooting (he alleged); they were employing agents-provocateurs to stir up the Syrians. One such man was Colonel Stirling, one of Spears' field officers. This theatrical performance inspired a rash of inaccurate and melodramatic stories about Stirling (William F., once a companion of Lawrence), who was promptly confused with David, of S.A.S. fame, and thereby regarded with awe and suspicion until the facts were checked. - See Times, Manchester Guardian, Daily Express, New York Times, Daily Mail, Sunday Express, 8-11 June 1945.

France the hostile movements of opinion in the Near East", and, incidentally, to control the Syrian oil pipelines. The British, by supporting "native demands that they had instigated themselves", and by employing agents "who can be recognised or disowned by London as occasion demands", had sought "the progressive eviction of France". As for the current situation, de Gaulle declared that France in no way accepted what had been "put over at her expense". This was immediately contradicted by subsequent speakers, and the Assembly called for friendly negotiations over Syria, despite de Gaulle's protest that "a compromise in the name of friendship must not always be sought at the expense of France".⁵⁷

There was a final characteristic retort from Carlisle, where Spears was belatedly calling on his constituents to re-elect him. From the campaign trail, Spears rebutted the Gaullist accusation, condemned Oliva-Roget and his ilk as tainted Vichyites, and declared that the British had done more to help the Levant States in four years than the French had done in twenty-five.⁵⁸ But the burghers of Carlisle were not greatly moved by these remote issues, and a month later Spears lost his seat in Parliament. That may have been part of the price he paid for taking the road to Damascus.

Even as the last echoes of the Spears Mission faded from public life, the remaining traces of the French mandate in Syria were being erased by the de facto authority of Paget's British forces. Though the last French soldiers did not leave the Lebanon until August 1946, the French mandate in the Levant was effectively obliterated in June 1945. Insofar as French authority still existed on 31 May, it was nullified by the arrival of Paget, who deprived the French Delegate-General of the means to enforce French decrees. In the wake of Paget's uncompromising directives, and Beynet's formal refusal to accept the Englishman's authority, no-one pretended any longer to observe the Lyttelton-de Gaulle agreement. By this agreement France retained the civil authority in the Levant, while the Delegate-General recognised the ultimate military authority of the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East. Between them, Paget and Beynet finally destroyed

this outdated pact, and with it went the last vestiges of French civil authority. The last French claims to a civilising mission in the Levant had already been exploded by Oliva-Roget's indiscriminate artillery.

As Furlonge observed on the spot, "June 1945...was perhaps the high point of British influence in the Levant States". While Paget's troops controlled the cities and enjoyed the sympathetic co-operation of the Syrians, most of the French military and civilian personnel withdrew into the Lebanon in the summer of 1945. If there was any intention of making a redoubt of the less-hostile Lebanon, this was frustrated in December when Pilleau (9th Army) revealed that British troops in Syria would be retiring into the Lebanon in the wake of the French.⁵⁹

In such decisions the British revealed both their unrelenting vigilance towards the French forces and their resolve not to seek a disguised mandate of their own in the Levant. It was made clear that they were leaving, as long as the French did. In Furlonge's words, "it would have been easy for the British during those...months to replace the French in almost every sphere of activity provided that they were prepared to bear the considerable cost in money and technical manpower". Britain, however, had no such intention, and was too thinly stretched in any case. Above all, London could not have paid the diplomatic price, which would probably have been a monumental breach in Anglo-French relations. Thus, as evidence to Paris of its honourable intentions, London pledged itself to a policy of "non-substitution", and did not fill the vacuum of practicalities created by the withdrawal of French services and installations.⁶⁰

The rest is a mere footnote to the decisive British intervention of June 1945. The final Anglo-French quarrel erupted in December over an abortive agreement that both sides should evacuate Syria. When it became clear that Pilleau's 9th Army was to follow the French into the Lebanon, de Gaulle exploded. If France was to be

ushered out of the Middle East altogether, by British forces which could then retire to their own extensive territories to the south - or even remain in the Lebanon, a possibility which de Gaulle naturally refused to discount - it would not be while Charles de Gaulle could still speak for France. He was right. A final agreement on the joint evacuation of the Levant was only put together after de Gaulle himself resigned on 20 January, 1946. He had had enough of "the exclusive regime of parties", and his position had been seriously eroded. The last straw, ironically, was the possibility of another Anglo-French crisis in the Lebanon, which could have isolated de Gaulle altogether. Silent and dignified, Cincinnatus withdrew - until France was in danger again.⁶¹

De Gaulle's resignation enabled Bidault to come to terms with the presence of the British army in the Lebanon, and at last an agreement for the simultaneous evacuation of the Levant was achieved. It was none too soon, for the Syrians and Lebanese had now switched their attention to the United Nations, where the Soviet Union happily supported their demand for the rapid departure of all foreign troops. In the end, France was bundled out of the Lebanon with undignified haste and a last reminder that she was not trusted in the Levant. London announced that British troops would be gone by the end of June 1946, but in Paris it was stated that logistical difficulties would delay the final French departure until April 1947. This explanation was flatly and openly rejected in Beirut, and the French were obliged to revise their timetables. In the event, their last soldiers had left the Lebanon by 31 August, 1946.⁶²

So ended, at least in the Levant, "the vision...of an indissoluble link between France and the colonies".⁶³ For the idea of the French empire and the myth of a civilising mission had placed men like Catroux and de Gaulle in profound conflict with the roots of that nationalism to which they had fatefully appealed in 1941. By the most curious, convoluted and controversial chain of events,

and despite the rather different intentions of the man himself, General Catroux's proclamation was literally fulfilled at last:

SYRIENS ET LIBANAIS!

...j'abolis le Mandat et je vous proclame libres et indépendants.
Vous êtes donc désormais des peuples souverains et indépendants... 64

And at last, Spears claimed, "I could say that the Mission given to me...had been fulfilled". If that was so, it had not happened without serious Anglo-French estrangements and without personal tragedy for Spears, in whom this Anglo-French schism had become strangely incarnate. As he recalled many years later, "it has been a very bitter experience to find myself opposed and having to oppose French policy so often. That is the tragedy of my life".⁶⁵ The other side of this tragedy, given the recent events in the Levant, is contained in the final words of Spears' memoirs: "Syria and the Lebanon had come into their own".⁶⁶

NOTES

- 1 Moyne letter, 1 November 1944, SPRS II/6.
- 2 Spears memoir, January 1945, SPRS I/1.
- 3 Churchill tel.(629), 23 November 1944, SPRS II/7.
- 4 Spears memoir, January 1945, SPRS I/1.
- 5 Eden minute, 17 November 1944; Churchill minute, 19 November 1944: F0954/xv.3.
- 6 F0371/40347/E7473.
- 7 Spears memoir, January 1945, SPRS I/1.
- 8 Furlonge interview, 2 June 1978.
- 9 Beirut telegram, 26 December 1944, F0371/40307/E7874.
- 10 Killearn tel., 23 December 1944; Foreign Office tel., 5 January 1945: F0371/40307/E7876.
- 11 Hankey minute on conversations with Ostrorog, 8 December 1944, F0371/40307/E7678.
- 12 Spears memoir, January 1945, SPRS I/1.
- 13 F0371/40347/E7600.
- 14 Spears tel., 14 December 1944, F0371/40347/E7675.
- 15 Eden tel., 20 December 1944, F0371/40347/E7753.
- 16 Spears memoir, January 1945, SPRS I/1.
- 17 Killearn tel., 23 December 1944, with Eastern Department minutes, F0371/40307/E7863.
- 18 Spears memoir, January 1945, SPRS I/1.
- 19 Copy of Spears article in F0371/40307/E7956.
- 20 Spears letter, 30 December 1944, SPRS II/7.
- 21 Times, Daily Express: 18 January, 1945.
- 22 Spears article, Sunday Express, 28 January 1945.

- 23 de Gaulle, iii.193ff.
- 24 Furlonge paper, p.9; Furlonge interview, 17 May 1978.
- 25 Shone tels., F0371/45556/E8,E207.
- 26 Grigg tel., 23 January 1945, F0954/xv.4.
- 27 Churchill minute, 28 January 1945, F0954/xv.4.
- 28 Eden minute, 4 January 1945, F0371/45556/E8.
- 29 F0371/45560/E1415.
- 30 Furlonge paper, p.9.
- 31 Churchill, vi.489f.
- 32 F0371/45560/E1340.
- 33 The Middle East in the War (1953), p.305.
- 34 Pearse, p.202.
- 35 Furlonge paper, p.10; F0371/45588/E2733, 45564/E3220.
- 36 Ibid; Woodward iv.331f. (withheld PREM files).
- 37 Furlonge paper, p.10; F0371/45564/E3291-3.
- 38 Furlonge interview, 2 June 1978.
- 39 Daily Telegraph, New York Times, 1 June 1945; Our Special Correspondent, Times, 2 June 1945.
- 40 Daily Telegraph, News Chronicle, 1 June 1945.
- 41 de Gaulle, iii.188.
- 42 Furlonge interview, 2 June 1978; F0371/45566/E3536.
- 43 Shone tels., 30 May 1945, F0371/45566/E3498, 45568/E3626 and F0954/xv.4.
- 44 F0371/45568/E3675, E3677; Churchill tel., 30 May 1945, F0954/xv.4.
- 45 de Gaulle (Documents), iii.249 and F0954/xv.4; de Gaulle, iii.190.
- 46 Foreign Office minute to Churchill, 4 June 1945, F0954/xv.4; de Gaulle, iii.189.
- 47 Daily Telegraph, 1 June 1945; de Gaulle (Documents), iii.252; New York Herald Tribune, 1 June 1945; de Gaulle, iii.187-195; F0371/45567/E3577; Foreign Office minute, 4 June 1945, F0954/xv.4.

- 48 Syria, May-June 1945, international press files, Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House.
- 49 de Gaulle, iii.191; Kirk, Middle East in the War, p.299.
- 50 de Gaulle (Documents), iii.250f.; Sachar, p.323; Furlonge paper, p.10.
- 51 Harold Callender (Paris), New York Times, 3 June 1945.
- 52 Ibid.; Le Monde, Manchester Guardian, 4 June 1945; de Gaulle (Documents), iii.253-262.
- 53 Duff Cooper, p.354; de Gaulle, iii.192.
- 54 Sunday Express, 27 May 1945; Times, 30 May 1945; Sunday Dispatch, 3 June 1945.
- 55 Times, 6 June 1945.
- 56 de Gaulle, iii.276; Duff Cooper, p.355f; see, e.g., Manchester Guardian, 25-29 June 1945, for offended responses and semi-apologies which followed the Spears Ambulance incident.
- 57 New York Times, New York Herald Tribune, Times, 20 June 1945.
- 58 Manchester Guardian, 21 June 1945.
- 59 Sachar, p.328; Furlonge paper, p.10f.
- 60 Furlonge, p.10f.
- 61 Times, 14 December and Manchester Guardian, 15 December 1945; de Gaulle, iii.276-281.
- 62 Sachar, p.330f.
- 63 Marshall, p. 2.
- 64 Catroux, p.137.
- 65 Terraine "Introduction" in Spears, Fulfilment, p.ix.
- 66 Ibid., p.298.

C O N C L U S I O N

History is lived forwards but it is written in retrospect. We know the end before we consider the beginning and we can never wholly recapture what it was to know the beginning only.

C.V. Wedgwood*

The more light that can be shed on the circumstances in which impressions were formed, decisions and actions taken, the better...

Oliver Harvey †

The most substantial aim of the present thesis has been to take the Levant dispute out of the realms of autobiography, polemics and special pleading, and to move beyond the simplistic interpretations which have often been placed upon this complicated affair. There has been no shortage of writings which have claimed to reveal what really happened in the Levant. Many of them are personal memoirs. Yet most of this material has merely served to deepen the mystery and to raise the question in a more acute form. The literature of the Levant affair has been riddled with a cavalier attitude to facts, and has generally succumbed to the distortions of hindsight and oversimplification. The most basic purpose of this thesis has therefore been to establish as far as possible the thoughts and actions and calculations of the time, to show how things came to happen, to recognise a number of causes, and to provide a more accurate picture of the whole situation.

It has been said that historians are sinking without trace in an ocean of facts, their little rafts overloaded with a cargo of documents: therefore the historian, looking beyond the eternal accumulation of facts, should incessantly ask the question 'Why?'.¹ In the broadest context, this point is no doubt valid, but the would-be historian of the Levant dispute is confronted with a rather different

* William the Silent (1944), p.35.

+ The War Diaries of Oliver Harvey (1978), p.12.

problem. He is surrounded, as it were, by people who immediately offer to reveal the meaning of the whole affair. None of them, however, seem too keen on establishing an adequate historical basis for their revelations. The problem in this case is not that interpretations have been lacking, but that the would-be interpreters have been jumping to conclusions which are superficial and unreliable. The literature of the Levant dispute contains its fair share of fallacies, but a slavish deference to historical facts is not one of them.

A serious attempt to establish the facts and terms of the dispute must therefore precede any worthwhile interpretations of the Levant affair. For this reason, much space has been devoted in these pages to explaining what happened in a series of controversial events and circumstances. The way was then open to ask how such things came to happen, and so, eventually, 'Why?'. And here again, many of the answers were to be found only by interrogating the documents and diaries of the day. Lord Harvey's comment on his own diary is true of the whole range of documents on the Levant affair:

Its whole value...lies in its "hotness", in the immediate impression and atmosphere.... This is how we saw things at the time.

... The more light that can be shed on the circumstances in which impressions were formed, decisions and actions taken, the better... 2

It is on this basis, for example, that the present thesis concludes that some of the most unfortunate British actions and decisions were the result of human limitations and blunders rather than the more sinister causes which have often been suggested. The bungled affair of the Acre Convention is a case in point. It would be rather silly to suggest that Wilson, a breezy character with the professional soldier's dislike of politics, was pursuing some sinister political design. It is clear, on the other hand, that Wilson's insular military pre-occupations led him into serious diplomatic blunders.

Such interpretations have not been prompted by any desire or need to cling to the middle of the road. They are the result of a

detailed inquiry into the circumstances. It is on the basis of such inquiries that interpretation, comment and analysis have been present throughout these pages. Nevertheless, while much may be explained along the way, there remains a danger of not seeing below the surface events, of failing to look beyond the immediate origins of numerous disputes to the fundamental problems of the whole Anglo-French presence in the Levant. Indeed, one of the flaws in the partisan versions has been such a failure to see the forest for the trees. Thus, having followed events on an almost day to day basis, it remains to stand back and see the whole affair in broader terms, and to identify the general determinants behind all the disputes and crises.

The first point which must be emphasised is that the Anglo-Free French occupation of the Levant was a maladroit improvisation, thrown together in response to a desperate military situation. While this should be clear from the present account, many statements of the Levant affair, beset by hindsight and the quest for a scapegoat, have obscured the importance of this fundamental fact. In the spring of 1941, Britain had no major allies, and she was faced with a series of military disasters and emergencies in the eastern Mediterranean. Driven out of Greece and Crete with heavy losses in men, material and ships, menaced by Rommel's advance, surprised by the Iraqi revolt and alarmed by the arrival of Axis aircraft in the Levant, the British hurriedly reversed their Syrian policy. The Free French welcomed this volte-face and accepted a fighting role in Operation Exporter.

In this hurried response to sudden new developments, neither the British nor the Free French were sufficiently prepared for the problems inherent in their joint occupation of Syria. "We were all in our war-time infancy", as Churchill later remarked, and the growing-up process was to be swift and disillusioning.³ As the dust began to settle in the Levant, the implications began to dawn on de Gaulle and the British, and all the liabilities and disadvantages

of their venture began to emerge. The haste and confusion of Exporter placed impossible strains upon the feeble structure of liaison and communications, and serious misunderstandings proliferated.

The worst problem of all proved to be the political basis of the campaign, Catroux's pledge of Syrian and Lebanese independence. This idea arose from the Free French anxiety to gain the Levant and its well-equipped garrison. It was a desperate expedient, ill-considered and loaded with potential trouble. Nevertheless, even while Dentz was being politely tolerated, Catroux's idea had tacitly become the nucleus of an audacious alternative policy. When British policy suddenly changed, his tactic was promptly wheeled out to play its fateful part. It was at best a calculated risk, and its author's calculations were upset by the extent to which the Levantines, with a degree of British blessing, managed to claim Catroux's promise. The British, shaken by an Arab revolt at a critical stage of the war, felt obliged to announce their guarantee of Catroux's pledge and to give it the weight of a recognised government. In doing so, however, they also reckoned without the Levantine nationalists, who saw and seized this golden opportunity to play the British off against the French. From the outset, the old spectre of Anglo-French rivalry in the Levant came forth to haunt and confound the joint occupants.

In retrospect it is clear that Operation Exporter was an unhappy improvisation, riddled with practical shortcomings and political pitfalls. These have produced rueful noises and bitter recriminations in the memoirs of those involved, but such sentiments tend to obscure the fact that Britain and Free France were very short of options in the spring of 1941. They were not to know that Hitler would expend his might in Russia, and never again pose a threat to the Levant. All the circumstances suggested that the Rashid Ali revolt was part of an overall Axis thrust towards the Suez canal. Everywhere the tide of battle seemed to be flowing against Britain and Free France, and any action, however desperate, seemed better than an Axis walkover in the Levant. On this point

Churchill and de Gaulle were emphatically agreed, and this was the fundamental priority at the time.

The issue in May 1941 was survival. Thus, to argue that the political minefields of the Levant should have been foreseen and avoided is to fall into the fallacy of hindsight. Insofar as the British and Free French were aware of these pitfalls, they saw no choice but to accept them as the price of a military emergency. This situation has been obscured by an epidemic of hindsight which has afflicted many interpreters of the Levant affair. The Gaullists, lamenting the loss of the French mandates, have looked back and seen the British guarantee as a premeditated anti-French device, while some Arabophiles have sighed that Britain should have gone into the Levant without the Free French. Such unrealistic statements ignore the actual conditions of the Syrian venture. The concern at the time was to make a quick and viable attempt to secure the Levant by combining whatever resources there were and hoping that Catroux's political stroke would compensate for military inadequacies.

One of the major determinants of the whole Anglo-Free French problem in the Levant was therefore their improvised response to the threat envisaged. Faced with the disastrous possibility of a German takeover in the Levant, the British and Free French had to employ desperate measures, and to shelve any misgivings about future arrangements in the Levant. Unfortunately these improvisations and expedients were loaded with political dynamite, and created the terms of an endless series of disputes.

Once the Levant had been occupied, the fundamental tensions and contradictions of the new situation made themselves felt. The British and Free French had now to face the results of the actions they had taken in response to their military predicament. With the war effort taking priority over earlier considerations in the region, the British now found themselves involved in the once forbidden French mandates. As the senior power in an unequal alliance, they

were henceforth far more visible and impressive than the Free French, who were scarcely distinguishable from their Vichy predecessors. Moreover, the repatriation of Vichy troops greatly reduced the sheer physical presence of France in the Levant. For the Levantines, the defeat of a French army by a multi-racial and largely British force must have had a profound effect on the official French image of a powerful and superior civilisation. By contrast, the British image was enhanced, and even such innocent practices as the resting and training of British battalions in Syria contributed to the impression that it was the British who really mattered now, not the French. Hence the many tales of rather bewildered Syrians being referred to the French civil authority when they approached the British with their petitions and requests.⁴

Such gradual and intangible effects at a grassroots level were bad enough for the Idea of the French mandate, but the joint occupation confronted the Free French with more immediate and sharply-defined embarrassments. Three distinct groups were now thrown together in the simmering intrigue of Levantine politics - the British, the Free French and the indigenous leaders. Most of the Syrian and Lebanese politicians were now taking a nationalist line, and they welcomed the opportunity to play a more public role. Catroux quickly discovered that his independence pledge had opened a Pandora's Box of troubles with the British and the local politicians, the latter exploiting the divergent aspirations behind the Anglo-Free French promise. The Levantines soon exposed the fact that Britain looked for a greater degree of independence in the Levant than Catroux had intended, or could afford, to concede. This undermined Foreign Office hopes that the cracks in the Levantine arrangement might be papered over. An exasperated Harvey called the Levantines "a cartload of monkeys, alive to all the tricks of playing off the French against the English".⁵ In the political terms of Operation Exporter, the nationalists saw a clear opportunity to advance their aspirations by exploiting Anglo-French differences. The Free French sought to maintain the mandate; the British wanted military security, Arab goodwill and satisfactory relations with

Free France; the nationalists, who wanted to be rid of the French, sought to frustrate Free French intentions by creating a threat to the first two British requirements. In this endeavour they enjoyed much success. Operation Exporter had produced a three-cornered game in which the Levantines, whose skill had been underrated, were dealt some excellent cards. This three-sided game influenced all the Anglo-Free French disputes in the Levant.

Another important aspect of the dispute was the nature of the policies adopted by the British and the Free French. Neither seemed to appreciate the pace of political evolution in the Middle East, or the forces they had unleashed, and amidst all their heated disagreements they shared a kind of anachronism in their formulation of the problem and the required policies. It is hard to say, in retrospect, whose policies were the more outmoded and unrealistic. If de Gaulle persisted in calling for a 1936-model deal, despite the estrangements which had followed that abortive affair, the British for their part were blind to the fallacy in their own formula. It was, of course, quickly spotted by the Arabophiles, but their views did not prevail in London. As Glubb wrote at the time,

Mr Churchill was uttering a paradox when he said that Syria would be granted her aspirations but France would, at the same time, retain her pre-eminence in Syria. The chief and principal Syrian aspiration is to get rid of the French. 6

Churchill's thinking, as Furlonge remarked, "had not proceeded beyond the conception to which the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1930 had given expression".⁷ The truth of this is evident at a number of points in the preceding chapters, where Churchill is to be seen reiterating, with some irritation, that France was to have in Syria no more or less than the position Britain had in Iraq.

While the contradictions and anachronisms of British policy in the Levant have already been stated, one point may be underlined here: the concept of 'British policy' is really a euphemistic shorthand expression. It does not indicate any wisely distilled, properly debated, collective decision in London. British policy contained too

much of the workings and limitations of Churchill's own mind. From his position as Prime Minister and Defence Minister, armed with his formidable personality, Churchill imposed his own will on the direction of the war to an extent which was often dangerous.⁸ This has been discussed in wider contexts, but it was also a factor in the Levant affair. Thus, in demanding an assault on Syria, the Prime Minister was prompted by dubious independent reports to overrule Wavell and his supporters in London. In this case, his impulsive methods had a lucky result, but Churchill's dominance had a less happy effect on subsequent Anglo-Free French affairs in the Levant. His inadequate understanding of the Middle East inspired the futile repetition of an unsatisfactory policy, for Churchill, despite his pre-occupation with more central war issues, still had the last word on the Levant. Behind the woolly terms of Britain's official stance in the Levant, and behind its irrelevant longevity, lay the disproportionate influence of the Prime Minister.

This is not to suggest that the flaws in British and Free French policy may be attributed purely to the anachronistic thinking of Churchill and de Gaulle. Wider considerations, both in and beyond the Middle East, had a strong determining effect upon the policies of both sides. In this sense, the policies of Britain and Free France were attempts to rationalise the predicament in which they found themselves in the aftermath of Exporter. For de Gaulle, the dilemma was particularly acute. Free France was striving to justify its claim to speak in the name of France itself, and to sign away France's hard-won and jealously-guarded rights in the Levant was unthinkable. The Free French, labelled as traitors and renegades by their own countrymen, were under intense pressure to prove that they were not condoning British encroachments on the French empire. This pressure was bound to make de Gaulle a difficult partner in the Middle East. Moreover, his ultimate aim - to resurrect France and its empire - did not allow the Levant situation to be treated on its local merits, for de Gaulle was bound to insist upon the

continuing validity of the mandate and the limited possibilities of Syrian independence. The Free French regarded the empire as an essential arm of France. They saw themselves as the guardians of this inheritance, not its liquidators: they had neither the desire nor the option to relinquish the French position in the Levant. These were the realities behind the lofty rhetoric employed by de Gaulle and Catroux in the Levant.

The British were also rationalising a position in which they had little room for manoeuvre. While the Free French were obliged to equivocate, the British tried to be all things to all men. Their involvement with de Gaulle and their own mandatory position determined their technical support for the French mandate, but their Arab interests forced them, in accordance with their guarantee, to make gestures in favour of Levantine independence. This attempt to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds was frustrated by the local nationalists and their external supporters. The independence pledge was an awkward commitment, for the degree of independence necessary to salvage British integrity depended on how exacting the Arab world chose to be. Unfortunately for Britain, the nationalists demanded a more genuine independence than Catroux had envisaged, and the Arabs in the British sphere refused to recognise Catroux's nominal republics. This has been represented by de Gaulle as the concerted response of British puppets, but in reality the British themselves were neatly trapped. They were forced to go further in their commitment to Levantine independence - and to collide inevitably with the Free French, who had gone as far as they intended to go. British and Free French policies were vain attempts to reconcile the contradictions of their respective positions in the Levant and their essential requirements elsewhere. These policies provided the nationalists with endless opportunities to set the British against the Free French for their own purposes.

It is in this context that we must understand the significance of Sir Edward Spears. His presence constituted a dualism within an ambiguity. If the ambiguity was British policy itself, the dualism was Spears' official obligation to be two beings in one, an aim never

achieved outside of Greek theology. Since his two responsibilities - liaison with the Free French and relations with the Levantines - were engaged in most disputes, and since the requirements of each tended to collide, Spears had to come down on one side or the other in nearly every case. It was a hopeless conflict of duties, and one which was clearly anticipated by Cadogan in September 1941:

if we appoint a separate representative in Syria, alongside General Spears, who represents us with the Free French, there may be a conflict.... but it could be resolved.... If one and the same man assumes both roles, the conflict will be in his breast, and he will resolve it, and one function or other will suffer.... 9

This advice was swept under the rug by a deal in which the Foreign Office took over from the Spears Mission as the official channel of Anglo-Free French liaison. This move was so overdue that the price seemed a small one. In return Spears received Churchill's warmest thanks for his labours, a knighthood, and a more important position in the Levant.

In these circumstances Spears returned to the Levant with responsibilities which no man, however well-disposed and impartial, could have reconciled. As Cadogan saw, one function or the other was bound to suffer when they collided, and in the prevailing conditions they were bound to collide continually. Spears' dual position became one more awkward factor in the Levant affair. His personal decision to favour the Levant States has sometimes obscured the fact that very little neutral ground existed. Had his priorities gone the other way, he would have been similarly execrated for harming Anglo-Arab relations. Spears himself, a forceful pragmatist, dismissed the dilemma of his double role and welcomed the initiative it allowed him. In doing so he set himself a third task, to make the Levant a solid asset to the Allies. Here he enjoyed great success, and a rare degree of co-operation with the Free French. Yet the one case in which he achieved some Anglo-French unity was also the only time that he dealt severely with the Levantines. Nowhere did it seem

possible to reconcile his two positions to the satisfaction of all parties.

Entrusted with irreconcilable duties, asked to follow a policy of paradox, Spears found his own ruthless solution by deciding where British interests lay in the Middle East, and finding in Churchill's statements a heavier emphasis on the Syrian side of British policy. He was not the man to sigh helplessly over the muddled contradictions of British affairs in the Middle East. If London could not get it right, he would help them to get it right. It never occurred to Spears that his forceful contributions might not be welcomed. Nor did he think it possible that he might be mistaken. His approach was unsuitable, for in retrospect it would seem that the fundamental British desire was to keep the Levant quiet and to postpone the problems. The rest was obligatory rhetoric. But this subconscious feeling in London was never officially imparted to Spears, whose instructions from Eden included a serious and quite literal view of the independence pledge.

The blame which has been attached to Spears has been out of all proportion to the deeper determinants of the affair. He was often tiresome and overbearing, he was an idealist where London needed a Talleyrand, and his personal crisis drove him too far towards the Levantines. It also clouded his view of wider horizons, for Spears failed to see that the forces unleashed against French rule in the Levant would soon be turned against the British. Yet, despite his pro-Arab approach and his barnstorming methods, it is a mistake to follow the Gaullists and Francophiles in their sweeping indictment against him. Their argument ignores all the built-in troubles of the Anglo-Free French occupation, and consistently underrates the skill and resources of the Levantine nationalists. They saw their opportunity and seized it. Yet to listen to Spears' accusers, one would almost think that the Syrians and Lebanese would have been insignificant without him.

On the contrary, Spears had his most harmful effect in London, and that unwittingly. His astonishing feud with the Foreign

Office, and his wounding attacks on the remote and feeble views of Eastern Department, blinded London to the most vital point which Spears was striving to make. In this sense he was his own worst enemy. As Furlonge put it,

We on the spot realised almost from the first day that...the home policy was anachronistic and unrealistic, and said it in every way we could: Spears probably too intemperately to be convincing... 10

In the light of the documents, it is certain rather than probable that Spears was too intemperate. This behaviour in a lesser man would have ensured his rapid removal, but Spears was a special case, and Churchill would not hear of his removal until 1944. The trail, once more, swings back to the influence of Churchill. One of the most suspicious circumstances of the Levant dispute, and one of the more impressive Gaullist deductions, has focussed on the length of time that the outspoken Spears was left at Beirut. It is now clear, however, that this was one more instance of human error rather than sinister intentions. Churchill's own stormy experiences with de Gaulle, and his admiration for Spears, prevented him from taking a more considered view of his old comrade's unsuitable position.

In concentrating on Spears, it is easy to lose all sense of proportion and perspective in the Levant affair, for the Anglo-Free French collision had more profound causes than the personal influence and policy of General Spears. He did not create the terms on which Britain and Free France entered the Levant, or the three-sided struggle which ensued. Nor did he create the flaws in British and Free French policy, and the wider pressures which lay behind them. Above all he did not create or control the resourceful nationalist movement in the Levant. These considerations take us back to the more fundamental features of the Levant affair. Moreover, the built-in problems and tensions which have been identified were themselves the products of a more deep-seated and universal dialectic. These reflections must therefore conclude by recognising the overall imperial process in which this whole affair belongs.

Two of the truisms of contemporary history are that the revolt against European hegemony is one of the most fundamental themes of the twentieth century, and that the Second World War hastened this universal process. Neither of these insights has been sufficiently stressed in the Levant debate. Throughout the colonial period, the European powers were caught in a dialectic of their own making. All their efforts to open up, exploit and modernise their territories tended to foster elements which would sooner or later assert their ability and right to political modernity and sovereignty. None of the expedients employed by the colonising powers escaped this dialectic. At best, they postponed the final reckoning with the progressive elements which the Europeans themselves had called into being.¹¹

This universal process was certainly at work in the Levant, and it overtook the Anglo-French endeavour to maintain the old conditions of European privilege. In Syria and the Lebanon the final reckoning was already near when Britain and France went to war with Hitler. By September 1939 the French were living on borrowed time in the Levant. Their last real chance of acquiring some sort of transitional deal slipped away when the 1936 negotiations were allowed to break down. Thereafter the nationalists lost all desire to treat with France, and the French fell back upon repression and military reinforcement to maintain the status quo in the Levant.

The French mandate was henceforth under siege, and the fall of metropolitan France proved fatal to French attempts to hold on in Syria and the Lebanon. The Levantines were soon extracting political concessions from the embattled Dentz. Their supreme opportunity came with Operation Exporter, and none of the nationalist leaders were taken in by de Gaulle's attempts to salvage the prestige and authority of France. Her time was up in the Levant, and the idea of treaty negotiations was dropped when de Gaulle could find no popular Levantine leaders who were prepared to treat with him. He fell back upon Catroux's political charades and a series of procrastinations, but these could only have worked with a generous measure of Levantine goodwill. Insofar as this had existed in the past, its stocks were virtually exhausted before Exporter began.

In the final analysis, the Levant affair must be placed in the context of the whole anti-imperial process. France was already on borrowed time in the Levant, and the winds of war blew away her last barriers against the future. Here was a case in which the Second World War clearly accelerated an anti-imperial trend. From a French view, the loss of the mandates may be counted among the casualties of 1940. The fall of France and the Vichy-Gaullist contest were events which the French imperialists never dreamed of when they rejected the 1936 negotiations. France thereby lost the last chance to extend her sojourn in Syria. By a strange irony one great European war established France in the Levant while the next, despite Gaullist aims, destroyed the French position in Syria and the Lebanon. A similar fate rapidly overtook the British in the Middle East. "Empire", as one of its novelists observed, "dooms itself to live in history and plot against history".¹²

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- 1 E.H.Carr, What Is History? (1961), pp.15f., 86f.
 - 2 Harvey, War Diaries, p.12.
 - 3 Churchill, ii.423. This remark was made about the Dakar expedition, but it is equally appropriate for Operation Exporter.
 - 4 Pearse, *passim*.
 - 5 Harvey, War Diaries, p.321.
 - 6 "A Note on a Visit to Damascus", November 1941, CO831/58/77065.
 - 7 Furlonge paper, p.5.
 - 8 See Harvey, War Diaries, pp.22,26, for examples of this.
 - 9 Cadogan minute, 28 September 1941, FO371/27310/E6021.
 - 10 Furlonge paper, p.12f.
 - 11 Barraclough, pp.153-198.
 - 12 J.M.Coetzee, Waiting for the Barbarians (1980), p.133.

Appendix A: SPEARS' REPORTS FROM THE MIDDLE EAST TO LONDON

In denying that he had been influenced by alternative reports from the Gaullist lobby, Churchill was unconvincing. It is quite clear that he had been strongly influenced on several occasions by Spears' telegram on Syrian strategy. Churchill realised that this situation was unacceptable to a Commander-in-Chief. On the very day when he denied Wavell's charge, Churchill instructed Dill to inform Spears that all signals relating to military matters must be sent through Middle East Command.

Spears was upset by this instruction, and attempted to have Churchill's decision reversed or watered down. "As every single question [has] some bearing...on military matters, this order deprives me of all power of independent comment [and] is in evident contradiction with the Charter of my Mission [which] lays down....that on military matters I am to report to the Minister of Defence [i.e., Churchill]", he argued, through Churchill's secretary: "Is it his intention to alter a practice which has worked well for a year?". Spears added that there was "much trouble ahead" in Free French issues. "My power of dealing with these has been greatly reduced as it is, owing to [Wavell's] determination to deal on most occasions with de Gaulle alone. The inevitable result is that latter plays one authority against the other and there is already considerable confusion.... So long as I held all threads in my hand I was able to cope with situation".¹

It was a good try, and Spears evidently felt that Wavell was also guilty of trespassing on another man's bailiwick. Nevertheless Churchill insisted that Spears obey Dill's instruction. On 6 June he replied that the original arrangement cited by Spears

worked all right when you and de Gaulle were in ... Central Africa, but cannot be continued while you are at Cairo or in Wavell's area. He took great offence at the idea that we were being influenced by advice contrary to his own, the tenor of which he did not know. I myself asked Chief of Imperial General Staff to tell you that your telegrams should in future go through Commander in Chief if they touched military matters.... You may still send telegrams about de Gaulle's movements or Free French personal issues through the Ambassador. 2

Thirty-five years later, Spears described this telegram as "a blow which hurt me so much that I can recall its pain today". His first reaction, he wrote, "was to demand my recall, throw in the sponge, and see the rest of the war from my seat in the House of Commons". In a contest of appeals to Churchill, "Wavell had won his point", and Spears saw this as a personal rebuff from his old comrade and Parliamentary colleague.

. Yet the talk of resignation actually came later. At first, Spears sought a way around the edict by re-interpreting it as an instruction to send signals to London "via the War Office" rather than through the Cairo Embassy.³ He therefore sent several important signals from Jerusalem between 11 and 17 June on the subject of an armistice with Dentz. (See Chapter 3). His way of acknowledging Dill's instruction was to send his telegrams from Wilson's Headquarters in Jerusalem to the War Office, and repeat them to Wavell's Command in Cairo.

This method clearly subverted the spirit of the edict and when Wavell's staff saw what Spears was doing they invoked Dill's signal. It was then that Spears realised the game was up and felt like throwing in the towel. His diary makes this plain:

A very nasty telegram from the Middle East on the subject of Armistice negotiations. They are swine.... de Gaulle looks to me to communicate to London on his behalf. He would object very strongly if his communications were vetted by Middle East and refuse to use me. These people make me sick at heart. I want to have the opportunity of telling Winston I am fed up, working very hard and no thank you's.... His telegram [of 6 June] cut me to the heart. 4

After a final attempt to outwit Middle East Command, all in a tone of injured innocence, Spears was forced to go through the proper channels.

All this had a most iniquitous effect on the question of the Syrian armistice, for Spears had evidently pulled off an agreement between General Wilson and de Gaulle on the terms of the armistice. This provided better conditions for the Free French than those which de Gaulle had to accept in Cairo on 19 June, let alone the disastrous terms signed in Acre on 14 July. Even if this original Wilson-de Gaulle understanding had had to be watered down, which was very likely, the Free French would have had little cause for complaint. As it was, all Spears'

good work went for nothing. In disavowing his activities and communications from Jerusalem, Cairo threw the baby out with the bathwater.

It is ironical that Spears himself must take a large share of the blame for this little tragedy. By his own maverick methods and his abrasive vigour, he had succeeded in alienating just about everybody in Cairo, and was regarded with suspicion and irritation in military circles. Finding himself cut out, forced to watch while the armistice question became increasingly muddled, Spears finally expressed his feelings to Churchill on 21 June:

the effect of your telegram has been to weaken my position in the most marked degree and it has made me doubt whether I can now carry on to any useful purpose.... I find practically all means of action withdrawn from me [and feel] at least justified in asking to be relieved of my duties.

I have told General de Gaulle that I intended doing this.... he refused to contemplate the idea and on the contrary asked in what way my position could be strengthened.

...It is my hope that work with executive powers may be found me.... something useful to do, the more difficult, and if possible the more dangerous, the better. 5

Churchill did not take kindly to talk of resignation, as Wavell had lately discovered, but he sent no retort - or reply - in this case. As for Spears, he soon found a new ally and lifelong friend in the Minister of State, Oliver Lyttelton, who arrived in Cairo on 5 July, determined to keep the "soldiers" in their place. Spears was given a new charter for action, and soon had more than enough to do.

1. Spears tel., 4 June 1941, SPRS II/5.
2. Churchill tel., 6 June 1941, SPRS II/7 and II/5.
3. Spears, Fulfilment, p.94
4. Spears Diary, 15 June 1941.
5. Spears tel., 21 June 1941, SPRS II/7.

Appendix B: THE VALIDITY OF THE FRENCH MANDATE

The day after Churchill claimed that the French mandate had lapsed, the Colonial Secretary sent the following signal to MacMichael in Jerusalem:

The fact that Vichy Government have given notice of withdrawal from the League of Nations does not have any effect upon French Mandate for Syria. Notice cannot legally take effect for two years. Moreover, even when French resignation does take effect, it will not necessarily terminate the Mandate: c.f. decision that Japanese withdrawal from the League did not in itself terminate Japan's Mandate over Pacific Islands.

When Churchill saw this academic contradiction of what he thought was a useful fact, he sent a terse note to the Colonial Secretary, Lord Moyne: "Why make all these admissions? Please report". The information in Moyne's telegram had been provided by the Foreign Office, who were uneasy about MacMichael's attitude to the French position in the Levant. Moyne therefore replied to Churchill:

When I saw this telegram I queried it myself. It was sent at the request of the Foreign Office. It was intended to be merely a statement of the legal position. I am [informing MacMichael] that no public use should be made of these facts. ¹

These facts were endorsed by various disinterested authorities. Two months later the Foreign Research and Press Service acknowledged the legal position in its Notes on the Problems connected with a Settlement in Syria, prepared for the further guidance of the Foreign Office: "It is true that the juridical status of Syria cannot be definitively settled until the end of the war. But in the meantime more immediate action can be taken to convince the Syrians that the Free French are both able and willing to honour their word. The process of handing over administrative powers to the Syrian and Lebanese Governments, which was begun [by] the Treaties of 1936 and reversed in 1939, can be resumed...". ²

1 PREM 3 422/14.

2 F0371/27346.

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Appendix C: SPEARS AND THE INDEPENDENCE OF SYRIA AND LEBANON

The idea of British association with the Free French proclamation was so well aired in British circles that the origin of the independence tactic itself has not always been clear in later accounts. The realities are hopelessly blurred in Spears' memoirs. Without mentioning Catroux, MacMichael, Lampson or Wavell - who had all long since discussed the idea with London - Spears tells how he "sent a long signal to London on 17 May [1941]" urging that Arab support be gained by

the Free French and ourselves giving the most solemn guarantee of absolute independence to the Levant States... subject only to maintaining there such troops as might be required by military necessity for the duration of the war...¹

Spears' treatment of this subject is quite misleading, and gives him undue credit for an idea which proved decisive to the future of Syria and Lebanon. The omissions and alterations in his account are crucial in this respect. From the very signal he cites, Spears omits this confession: "So far I have felt native feeling could be largely disregarded". In taking "the natives" seriously, he was therefore six months behind Catroux and his British confidants.

A more serious distortion occurs when Spears manipulates this signal in relation to the declaration of independence actually made. His wire simply did not say "absolute independence to the Levant States". It called for "absolute Syrian independence" whereas "question of Lebanon would be reserved. The Christian population in any case not anxious to be included Moslem block". This distinction was drawn in response to the current rumour that the Vichy forces intended to abandon Syria and concentrate in the rugged Lebanon.² Spears therefore suggested this adaptation of the independence tactic as a counter-measure to assist the Allies to occupy Syria. That was the point of his wire. Even then, when the exasperated

Wavell saw this signal he fired off another, declaring that "at this stage exclusion of Lebanon will defeat our object" and implying that Spears had gone off half-cocked.³

In the light of these documents, Spears' later version of the independence device is largely humbug. It exemplifies one of the worst features of personal memoirs. The same may be said of the passage on page 96f. of Spears' memoirs, where he speaks of "my proposal" and by a convenient ambiguity of style gives the impression that he initiated the independence idea itself.

It is a pity that Spears was not content with his actual achievement, which the bony hand of the historian cannot touch. This was to do more than any other man to ensure that the promise of independence to the Levant States was honoured. For this he earned the lasting gratitude of the Syrian and Lebanese leaders, and the everlasting wrath of Gaullists and British Francophiles.

1 Spears, Fulfilment, p.83.

2 Spears tel., 17 May 1941, SPRS IA.

3 Wavell tel., 19 May 1941, SPRS IC/I.

Appendix D: OLD FRENCH WINE IN NEW BRITISH BOTTLES:
THE MICKELSEN VERSION OF THE LEVANT AFFAIR, 1941.

In 1976, Martin L. Mickelsen published an article entitled "Another Fashoda: The Anglo-Free French Conflict over the Levant, May-September 1941".¹ Quoting "original British Foreign Office records", Mickelsen argued that "the British inflicted another Fashoda on the Free French and on France". Behind the origins and the aftermath of Operation Exporter, Mickelsen claimed, there was a distinct and concerted British plan to dash Free French hopes and to sacrifice the French mandates to the demands of Arab nationalism. This scheme was allegedly masterminded by Churchill and implemented by all the major British authorities in the Middle East. "Taking advantage of the helplessness of France", Mickelsen concluded, "the British government inflicted another Fashoda on their erstwhile ally".²

There is nothing essentially new about Mickelsen's argument, which more or less re-states the Gaullist version of 1941. The new feature is Mickelsen's use of the recently-opened Foreign Office documents to support and restate the old accusations. These seem far more formidable and worthy of fresh consideration when they re-appear bristling with archival footnotes.

Yet when the whole question is weighed and investigated, it must be said without hesitation that Mickelsen does not deserve to be taken seriously. No careful examination of the files quoted by Mickelsen - let alone all the other British documents which he did not consult - and no adequate inquiry into the contemporary circumstances, can possibly endorse his superficial case. Mickelsen's argument rests on glaring factual errors, unfounded assertions, serious documentary omissions, misleading methods, and what must be called a half-baked and highly selective approach to the archives. It is a truism that one can prove almost anything from a revered source if the fundamental principles of interpretation are set aside. What Mickelsen has really proved is that this old truism, however boring and familiar, cannot be ignored. While it would be pointless to list every single transgression, the following

paragraphs should be sufficient to illustrate that the above remarks are not unwarranted.

Serious factual errors are plentiful. For example, Mickelsen states that "de Gaulle was finally compelled to accept the reference to the British guarantee in the Free French proclamation" (i.e., Catroux's announcement of 8 June 1941 to the Levantines). This is sheer fiction. De Gaulle, in fact, successfully insisted that the Free French statement would contain no reference to any British guarantee, which he considered an insult to the integrity of France. (See Chapter 2). Mickelsen had only to read de Gaulle's memoirs to be alerted to this, and he could have verified it in F0371/27302/E4169, which gives the texts of Catroux's proclamation and the separate statement which the British issued in its wake. Mickelsen, incidentally, cites no source at all for his unique assertion.³

Again, he states that Catroux signed the secret protocol of the Acre Convention. This is equally astonishing. Catroux was not even allowed to sign the main agreement, thanks to General Wilson's efforts to satisfy de Verdilhac. Mickelsen bases this novel claim on an ambiguous minute by C.W. Baxter, whom he follows in misinterpreting the Cairo cables to which it was attached.⁴ These telegrams refer vaguely to Catroux without ever saying that he signed anything. Yet it is quite clear from neighbouring files, (e.g., F0371/27300/E3877), that Catroux merely signed a letter saying that he agreed with the main Convention itself. (See Chapter 3). Mickelsen compounds this error by claiming that Spears was then sent hurrying to Acre to prevent Catroux from "repudiating his act". Not surprisingly, no source is given for this strange assertion, since Catroux did not sign the protocol at all and Spears never went to Acre in July 1941. In fact, Spears was furious that the Free French had been so neglected and let down, and he promptly volunteered to go to the Levant to correct Wilson's blunders and to rescue Free French requirements. In this he had the full blessing of Lyttelton, who was equally upset by Wilson's follies. Spears flew to Beirut and went directly to Ain Sofar, where he confronted Wilson with the disastrous implications of his blunderings.⁵ (See Chapter 3).

Such mistakes are blended with a series of distortions, for Mickelsen confines himself to the events and documents which seem to support his case. Having done this, he either asserts that some act or statement was decisive, or suggests that some convenient document was

definitive of the British approach. An example of the former option is his version of the row over the occupation of Soueida. Quoting Spears' bluster to Catroux about cutting off Free French finances if Catroux did not back down, Mickelsen claims that "this threat...had the desired effect". It did not. Lyttelton actually told Spears that Wilson must "issue categorical instructions to all concerned to collaborate fully with the Free French and give generous effect to their wishes". (See Chapter 4). As a result, it was the British who had to pull out of the Residency in Soueida.⁶

The suggestion that some document, isolated from its context and its subsequent fate, was definitive of the British attitude, is another dubious method employed by Mickelsen. Thus he readily quotes Churchill's crass paper of 19 May on Syrian policy, in which the Prime Minister claimed that the French mandate had lapsed, and generally went off half-cocked. But Mickelsen does not tell us what became of this nonsense. Churchill may perhaps be forgiven for dashing off a few bloody-minded and silly ideas at a most frantic and desperate moment of the war. Less forgiveable is Mickelsen's use of this document to define subsequent British policy in the Levant. The document will not bear the weight of this interpretation, for the official British position throughout the war was that the French mandate was still valid. In a matter of days Eden had begun to guide Churchill away from his hasty fallacies. Mickelsen ignores this, and omits scores of other documents which must be digested in any adequate treatment of British policy in the Levant.⁷ (See Chapter 2).

Even those documents which are quoted are frequently stood on their heads or treated in a cavalier fashion. In quoting War Cabinet Conclusions of 28 August, Mickelsen has Churchill saying that the Free French cause had been "an embarrassing commitment". But the record does not attribute this expression to Churchill, or any other individual, but to the general "discussion". Indeed, from the context it would seem that this view was put to Churchill and Eden in the form of a challenge by other members of the Cabinet, for the record states that "THE PRIME MINISTER AND THE FOREIGN SECRETARY explained... our policy in this matter". Churchill and Eden were obliged to repeat to the Cabinet, and re-assert, the standard British formula that the Syrians were to receive their independence but that France was to retain a privileged position

in the Levant.⁸

The Mickelsen version will not stand a thorough examination of all the available documents and a serious attempt to understand them in their context. It is clear that most of the relevant documents have either been overlooked entirely or coolly set aside. Those which are used seem to have been chosen on the basis of a simplistic bias, and are by no means properly handled in any case. Nor does Mickelsen show much appreciation of the exceedingly complicated, confused, and improvised nature of the whole affair. He imposes a simple conspiracy theory upon the complex and muddled realities of the spring and summer of 1941, and gathers into the fellowship of a Churchillian plot some unlikely conspirators: Wavell, who wanted to keep out of Syria anyway; Spears, a fierce champion of Free French aims until the end of July; Lampson, who helped Catroux and stressed Britain's pledge to respect the French empire; Lyttelton, who personally travelled through the Levant to see that the Free French were properly installed; and Auchinleck, the most unlikely political conspirator. Indeed, Mickelsen does not seem to have encumbered himself with very much information at all. While confidently referring to "Churchill's intentions", he does not even make use of the Prime Minister's (PREM) files.⁹

The crowning error is the claim that Britain inflicted "another Fashoda" on the French by insisting in September 1941 that Catroux should "honor his pledge to the Levant States by granting independence immediately". According to Mickelsen, the measures by which Catroux established his so-called republics in Syria and the Lebanon were a disaster for France, imposed on her by perfidious Albion. This is untrue. Quite apart from the fact that Catroux himself initiated the whole idea of proclaiming independence for tactical purposes (which Mickelsen fails to acknowledge anywhere in his article), Catroux's measures legitimised the Free French control of the Levant States. Mickelsen seems to have taken "independence" literally and assumed that this is what Catroux granted in the autumn of 1941. He could hardly be more mistaken in this assumption. Catroux's version of independence was a gigantic euphemism behind which the Free French managed to maintain the old system virtually intact. (See Chapters 4 and 5). To use the emotive analogy of Fashoda is to quite misunderstand the nature of Catroux's measures. At Fashoda in 1898 the

British forced the French to withdraw: at Beirut and Damascus in 1941, the British lent their official recognition to a mere parody of independence and a continuation of French predominance in the Levant. While all this eventually backfired on Catroux and de Gaulle, the end result cannot be attributed to some vast British plot.¹⁰

Mickelsen's account of the Levant affair in 1941 is superficial and misleading, and his argument cannot be taken too seriously. It is built on outright errors, dubious methods, slick research and an arbitrary choice of evidence. It rips from its context one easily-distorted aspect of a many-sided problem, and magnifies it out of all proportion. Advancing on his target in this fashion, Mickelsen shoots from the hip - and misses by a wide margin.

1 Revue Francaise d'histoire d'Outre-Mer, Vol.LXIII, 1976.
 2 Ibid., pp. 100, 76, 98f.
 3 Ibid., p.81.
 4 Ibid., p. 87n.
 5 Ibid., p.86f.
 6 Ibid., p.90.
 7 Ibid., p.77f.
 8 Ibid., p.95 and 95, note 46. (upper case as in document).
 9 Ibid., pp.81, 76.
 10 Ibid., p.98f.

Appendix E: ALTERNATIVE ADVICE ON BRITISH POLICY IN THE LEVANT

Some of the problems and pitfalls of Britain's hastily-improvised venture in the Levant were being pointed out to the Foreign Office before Churchill made his statement of 9 September in Parliament. Between 23 July and 3 September, several advisory papers by Professor H. A. R. Gibb, of the Foreign Research and Press Service, were received. In these papers the Professor explained the problems created by the Anglo-Free French position, and how hard it would be to satisfy all parties - the French, the local peoples, the Arab world and the British - in the light of the independence promises. He showed how easily the most serious mistakes could be made. Finally, he recommended that several decisive steps should be taken to avoid serious trouble and to secure the future political stability of the whole Anglo-French position in the Eastern Mediterranean.

None of this was pointed out to the Prime Minister. Within the Foreign Office itself there was a reluctance to believe that the problems were really as acute or urgent as Gibb suggested, while his recommendations were too sweeping to be pursued by any but the most far-seeing and resolute people. This effectively doomed Gibb's contribution to oblivion, for his papers came to Eastern Department's C. W. Baxter, arguably the most inadequate man in the Foreign Office. Baxter confined himself to affixing such polite comments as "very interesting", and nothing more was heard of Gibb's papers.¹ Consequently, when Churchill's proposed policy statement passed through Eastern Department it was not exposed to any alternative argument, despite the fact that Churchill's text embodied some of the blunders of which Gibb had warned.

It would not have been easy, admittedly, to present Gibb's case in the current circumstances. There was a general tendency in London to fight shy of any long-range decisions on Arab affairs and the Eastern Mediterranean, and the gravity of the war situation in the summer of 1941 made procrastination only too easy. In addition,

Churchill and Eden did not appear very receptive to broad decisions affecting the future of the whole Arab world. In August, for instance, it was pointed out in a War Cabinet meeting that

Free French policy in Syria had been, from some points of view, an embarrassing commitment. If we could take a new view of the position in Syria we might be able to reach a general settlement with the Arab countries...

Churchill and Eden replied by simply reiterating British policy in the Levant and adding that "a settlement of the Arab question generally raised far more difficult issues, and it would probably be premature to attempt to deal with it".²

It was thus an unsympathetic climate in which to press any long-range measures concerning the Middle East. Nevertheless there was surely some dereliction of duty in the Foreign Office when the Prime Minister, on asking whether there were any objections to his proposed Parliamentary statement, was given none whatsoever. As it was, the warnings expressed by Gibb were not heard and some of his worst fears were actualised in British policy and practices. Churchill's repeated insistence that the satisfaction of the Arab world was Britain's chief priority, to be pursued whether the Free French liked it or not, contrasts starkly with the following passages from two of Gibb's papers:

French and British interests in the whole area of Syria-Palestine are either identical or closely parallel....

The only possible conclusion to be drawn is that France and Great Britain must in this area either stand together or both go out. The solution [is that] they should (a) either maintain joint bases or jointly garrison certain internationalised zones within a strategic scheme which embraces the whole Eastern Mediterranean area... and (b) outside these bases or zones give the fullest measure of independence to the Arab countries, with adequate guarantees for the [Lebanese Christians] and Zionists. 3

It cannot be too strongly emphasised that the problem of a settlement in Syria is at bottom a British rather than a French problem, and cannot be solved by insisting on one-sided concessions by the French. 4

In the event, the problems and dangers which Gibb had identified, including "the old spectre of Anglo-French rivalry in the Levant", proved to be every bit as serious as he had suggested.⁵ None of his ideas reached the top of the policy-making tree. The old muddle-through tradition of localised running repairs prevailed, while the basis of the whole Anglo-French edifice in the Middle East was steadily being eroded. This is not to lament a lost empire, or to suggest that Gibb's ideas would have allowed everyone to live happily ever after. But just about any attempt at a gradual Anglo-French devolution in the Eastern Mediterranean would have been an improvement on what happened. As it was, first France and then Britain departed against a background of violent and inconclusive upheavals. Quite apart from the damage done to Anglo-French relations, these events left permanent scars on the peoples whom Britain and France were supposed to have reared to maturity in the name of progress.

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- 1 Baxter minute, September 1941, F0371/27308/E5450.
 - 2 Extract from War Cabinet Conclusions, 28 August 1941, F0371/27308/E5339.
 - 3 Gibb paper, "French interests in Syria", 12 August 1941, F0371/27308/E5450.
 - 4 Gibb paper, "Syria: the Problem of Bases", 3 September 1941, F0371/27308/E5450.
 - 5 Gibb paper, "Notes on the Problems connected with a Settlement in Syria", 23 July 1941, F0371/27346.

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