Contents

PREFACE vii

PROLOGUE Legacy of Equivocation by Jamil Mardam Bey ix

1. A HISTORICAL OUTLINE OF SYRIA 1

2. SYRIA AND VICHY 15

3. SYRIA AND THE FREE FRENCH 37

4. THE PRESIDENCY OF SHEIKH TAJ AL-DIN AL-HASANI 54

5. THE NATIONALISTS RETURN TO POWER 79

6. THE EXPANSION OF NATIONAL POWER 98

7. CRISIS IN SYRIA'S RELATIONS WITH FRANCE AND BRITAIN 122

8. DEADLOCK IN FRANCO-SYRIAN TALKS 146

9. THE GROWING DISCORD 166

10. THE MILITARY CLASH 197

APPENDIX La Ligue Arabe by Jamil Mardam Bey 228

BIBLIOGRAPHY 233

INDEX 236
To my father and to all those who fought for the freedom and dignity of man.
This book consists of a narrative of the political history of Syria during the Second World War, with particular attention being given to Syria's relations with France and Britain. Its theme is the struggle of the Syrian Nationalists against European imperialism. Its purpose is to show that the Syrian Nationalists played the major and decisive role in attaining their country's independence, while adhering firmly to a democratic system of government; that they did so with remarkable determination and skill despite the weakness of their position. This work draws heavily on the private papers of Jamil Mardam Bey, the prominent Syrian leader, for primary information and perspective. Extensive use has also been made of British diplomatic archives from 1939 to 1945 and of French official documents up to September 1944. Researchers wishing to consult official French sources covering the crucial year of 1945 will have to wait until 2003, when they are due to be released.

Jamil Mardam Bey had a deep sense of history and so kept his papers in meticulous order from the early days of his political life, which date back to the early part of this century. The span of the papers stretches from his student days in France in 1909 to his death in 1960. The importance of these papers lies in the fact that they constitute primary historical material originating in Syria at the time events occurred, untouched by hindsight or conjecture. None of the papers has been published or seen by anyone, except by the author. Many of them are cited in this book for the first time.

When in office, Mardam Bey used to keep copies of important government documents at his home. His collection comprises a full documentation of his years in office from 1933 to 1939 and from 1943 to 1949. Among his papers are detailed accounts of the various stages of Franco-Syrian negotiations as, throughout these stages, Mardam Bey was the chief negotiator. His negotiations with the British, the Americans and the Soviets during the war years were also recorded.

Apart from official documents, the Mardam papers include minutes, memoranda, notes, texts of speeches, interviews with the press, diaries, newspaper cuttings, personal reflections and correspondence with
various personalities. The latter include letters from King Abdel Aziz ibn Saud dating from the early 1930s until the king's death in 1953. The papers are unique in that they are the only complete collection of documents kept by any Syrian leader of that time.

An article entitled 'Bilan d'une équivoque' was written by Jamil Mardam Bey in 1939, after the French high commissioner, Gabriel Puaux, had suspended the Syrian constitution and dismissed the parliament in July 1939, following the French government's refusal to ratify the treaty which had been concluded between Syria and France in 1936. Puaux had also restored the mandatory regime which had been abolished three years earlier. Mardam Bey was on the point of publishing the article when the war broke out and he felt that the moment was not right for it. 'Bilan d'une équivoque' was a reply to the various accusations the French had made against the national government of 1936–1939, as well as an indictment of the mandatory regime in Syria. An English translation of it by the title of 'Legacy of Equivocation' is published here as the prologue to the work. Another of his private papers, a personal commentary on the Arab League written in 1945, appears in its original form in the Appendix.
Misunderstanding prevailed over relations between France and Syria at the armistice. Both had suffered and both had emerged triumphant from the tribulations of the war. This misunderstanding had gradually been developing for twenty years, bringing with it unrest and violent clashes which sprang from failures, shattered illusions and desertions, casting a weary shadow over ten centuries of rich friendship, of cordial contacts, parallel aspirations and intellectual and commercial exchanges. My political activity between 1920 and 1939 had but a single aim: to rid our countries of this misunderstanding.

At the root of the problem was the Mandate. It has already been established that of all Wilson’s ideas, this was the most obscure. It was a concept which was difficult to translate into a system of clear ideas which would offer the basis for rational political organisation. In order to understand this concept it is necessary to embrace ill-defined notions and contradictory expectations. The Mandate is a baroque edifice, constructed from widely differing ideologies. No one has ever succeeded in defining its structure or in specifying its aim. All efforts made to impose this fiction, to enshrine it in a legal or political reality, have aroused bloody and violent reactions. But if it is difficult to know what exactly the Mandate is or to predict what it could have been, it is relatively easy to see what it has been. My intention is not to put this institution on trial, nor to analyse or to criticise its constituent charter. Eminent jurists from France, England, Germany, America, Holland, Romania and Switzerland, as well as some distinguished young scholars from our own country, have already brilliantly highlighted the incoherent nature and failings of this unhappy innovation of the peace conference. It is not the institution itself which I will examine, neither the spirit nor the letter of which was ever applied. By Mandate I understand above all a certain way of viewing Syrian problems, a certain way of administering Syria, a regime, a type of behaviour, a
regime whose arbitrary nature was recognised by the French statesmen Clemenceau, Poincaré, Briand, Herriot, Daladier, Blum and Bonnet, a type of behaviour whose failure was proclaimed by high commissioners de Jouvenel, Ponsot and de Martel. Politically the aims envisioned by the mandate thus defined were as follows:

1. In western Asia, compressed between the vastness of the sea and the sands, there is a long strip of land which forms a bridge between Asia Minor, Mesopotamia and Africa; this land has always been called Syria. Throughout its existence the mandate never ceased dismembering this territory and thus encouraging the greedy desires of neighbouring states. The interplay of interests and ambitions shattered Syria's political unity and handed the outermost provinces successively to England and to Turkey. The mandate broke both the moral and spiritual unity of the country, making it extremely difficult both for France and for Syria to implement positive policies. Yet Syria always remains an evident natural reality, a geographic and economic fact.

2. The decisive factor, and a major and crucial one in Syria, is Arabism. And yet the mandate's actions over the last twenty years reveal its almost total ignorance of this factor. This is one of the major reasons for the difficulties it has encountered. The regime which governed Syria after 1920 set out to perform a number of tasks: install foreign communities in Syria, systematically inspire them with a false and aggressive regionalism, oppose with a benevolent passivity anything undertaken by Damascus, neutralise the spirit of Damascus and its influence, separate it, both from the sea and from southern Syria controlled by England. And in all these aims it was Damascus which was used for target practice.

Some Syrian regions have been transformed into a kind of tree nursery where exotic species, transplanted in our soil, have been forced to acclimatise in conditions to which they are not accustomed. The intention was to make Syria into a vast field of experiments, culminating in the more or less long-term erosion of the Muslim majority.

3. But the chief characteristic of the mandate was its powerlessness to replace the structures of Syria, to rejuvenate its administration and to set it on the path towards harmonious development. The mandate was a regime of trial and error par excellence. Established in a climate of uncertainty and duplicity, exercised in an atmosphere of mistrust and agitation, it was always paralysed by fear; it was too scared to look to the future. It was caught in a past which it sought to crystallise once more. It cared only for flaws and shared interest only in discord. It remembered nothing but defeat. It set its sights on the old, the small; it hesitated. It mistrusted intelligence, youth, courage, initiative. It feared our mountains, which it abandoned to autonomist agitation, our deserts
which it left to the army, our borders which it handed over to
neighbouring countries. Established in order to speed our country
towards independence, it never dared to develop amongst the Syrians
the only virtues which would have assured France a permanent
influence in Syria: a sense of patriotism and a sense of responsibility.

Created exclusively in the interests of the Syrians, the mandate
worked hard to eliminate Syrians from the government of their own
country. Not only were they excluded from all the international
negotiations on which the fate of their country depended, but in
addition the mandate never even admitted their effective participation
in the administration.

Nothing is more painful than to assess the consequences of these
policies, by which France has, since its victory, imposed on Syria the
greatest and most irreparable losses. In 1914 this resulted in
international accords which provided, in the event of the
dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, for the French zone of
influence in the Near East to comprise all the natural territory of Syria.
The award of Syria to France established a true balance of power
between the French and British in the Near East: 'The Mediterranean
will only be free for us', declared the French naval minister Georges
Leygues in May 1915 'if Syria remains in our zone of influence. But it is
important to understand by this not a mutilated and dismembered Syria,
but a Syria which is politically, economically and geographically whole,
one which reaches from El-Arish to the Taurus and from Eastern
Mesopotamia to the shores of the sea.'

The maintenance of French influence in Syria and its intellectual and
economic supremacy are not irreconcilable with the aspirations of the
Syrian nation. If France had succeeded in retaining Syria's natural
borders, a Syrian federation might have been conceivable. Filled with
unlimited confidence in French policies, our country would willingly
have lent all its resources and means to the services of a generous and
allied power. Unfortunately the Syria entrusted to France, which France
should have guided towards the day when it could govern itself alone,
has been relentlessly torn apart.

On 11 May 1916 in the Sykes–Picot Agreement, France renounced all
Syrian claims on Palestine and Transjordan, abandoning territory
covering some 70,000 km² to England. On 16 September 1919
Clemenceau gave up the Vilayet of Mosul to Lloyd George, not even
suspecting the size of the region's oilfields. The Vilayet of Mosul covers
an area of 120,000 km². Syria has not suffered from this relinquishment
because Mosul became Iraqi and Arab territory. For after it had
defended it from Turkish claims, Britain incorporated Mosul into the
independent kingdom of Iraq. This pleases us, since we are united with
our brothers in Iraq by blood ties and cultural links.
On 20 October 1921 M. Franklin-Bouillon ceded to Turkey the richest region of northern Syria and the region with the largest Christian population: Cilicia, a region covering some 50,000 km² of fertile land. Turkey having won the case, it was assumed that it would not make any more claims on Syria. But from that date until 1930 the Syrian border with Turkey was constantly shrunk and eroded (the Turko-Syrian convention of friendship and good neighbourliness of 18 February to 18 May 1926, the border protocol of the third sector of the Turkish–Syrian border, 22 June 1929, the final protocol on the Turkish–Syrian border of 3 May 1930). In 1930 the Syrian border was once again declared inviolable by Turkey.

Finally, on 23 June 1939, following bitter and humiliating negotiations begun in 1937, Turkey was given the Sanjaq of Alexandretta. Besides the town of Alexandretta itself, this comprised the plains of Omk and Antioch, the ancient capital of Syria. And in exchange Syria, which had borne the brunt of the enterprise, received some small satisfaction when Turkey definitively renounced all claims on Syrian territory.

I know the excuses invoked in order to justify these weaknesses. If, it is claimed, Syria had not been so hostile towards France and towards collaboration with France, perhaps France’s defence of its territory would have been stronger.

This has never been proved. But this statement rests on a hypothesis which is itself erroneous. Syria has never been hostile towards French collaboration, even less towards France itself. It fought the mandate, that is to say, a unilaterally imposed and defective system of control. What it asked France to do was to remain in Syria on the basis of a contract, an accord freely concluded which respected both the rights of Syria and the interests of France.

When speaking of French rights over Syria and Syrians’ rights over their own country, we should never forget France’s successive territorial concessions totalling some 240,000 km² (the lands at present included in the French zone of influence scarcely amount to 170,000 km²).

What advantage has our country gained from all the sacrifices imposed upon it, without consultation? What compensation have we received from France for all those generous acts carried out in our name to consolidate its alliances and the peace? Did anyone think to ensure for us at the very least a quiet, dignified existence, a life in which our rights are respected in the weakened and mutilated territory which is all that remains?

Good patriots and loyal friends and allies of France, forward-thinking Syrians regard the madness with which some circles envisage the dismemberment of Syria with considerable apprehension. It seems that they are already rejoicing over the final result. But this result inspires little confidence. Before the 1914–18 war French was the only language
spoken by the élite in Turkey, Cilicia and Iraq. In Palestine it occupied pride of place. But today no one speaks it any more in any of these countries. What compensation is it if in Jazira the Syrian flag is desecrated and the police 'sent from Damascus' are assassinated? Since the armistice France has abandoned the copper mines of Angora, the cottonfields of Cilicia, the Vilayet of Mosul, the fortified town of Alexandretta, the pastures of Om al-Jamal and of al-Omk. Are they consoled by the fact that in Jabal Druze and in Latakia 'the people of Damascus' are insulted and the magistrates of government expelled?

It is these policies which we have fought against and which we will never cease to denounce as harmful, both to Syria and to France. It is these policies which are responsible for the difficulties encountered by the national government of 1936 to 1939. In establishing a constitutional and responsible government, to put an end to the irresponsible government of the country, a state of affairs which encouraged anarchy, we were not ignoring the complex problems which we had to confront. Yet whenever we felt we had a right to count on the mandatory administration, it failed us.

On taking power we realised that the mandate, instead of reducing local differences, had aggravated them to the point where any solidarity between the provinces and any collaboration between the French and Syrian authorities was made impossible.

The mandate has prepared no administrative structure for us. The mandate has never allowed effective Syrian participation in the Syrian administration. The collaborators it chose were henchmen or yes-men. After 16 years of French assistance we had at our disposal no governors, no chiefs of police, no professional departmental heads. We lacked technicians, financial experts, teachers, economists, people with experience. The Serail preserved its old routines, its antiquated wise men, its outdated Ottoman practices. Every time we undertook, to quote the Reverend Father Jalabert, 'to close the gaps and to lubricate contacts', the old machine reacted in its ancient way and failed to deliver the goods.

There have been some excellent French officials in Syria. But none of them has been able to give of his best or to leave work of any lasting effect behind. The minister under this regime did not dare to do anything without the counsellor. The counsellor dared plan nothing without the advice of the delegate. The delegate was under the control of the high commissioner. The high commissioner submitted his initiatives to the Quai d'Orsay and the Quai d'Orsay was paralysed in Syrian matters by Geneva. The mandate was even more of a constraint for France than it was for Syria.

The result was a regime of solutions which were as reliable as a house of cards, a regime supported by provisional scaffolding, an
ephemeral construction inspired by tired ideologies, by a short-sighted
sentimentality, as ignorant of the lessons of the past as it was of the
realities of the present and the requirements of the future.

This institution had the most unfortunate consequences: Syria saw
20,000 of its men killed and more than three-quarters of Syrians ruined,
losses of 240,000 km² of land, the gradual disappearance of local
industry and craftsmen, the decline of its commerce, the flight of all the
gold amassed by Syrian efforts or left in Syria by the Turks, the British
and the Germans during the war, the demoralisation of our young
people, increases in the dispossessed and the unemployed, the
persecution of Syrians abroad, even in the French colonies.

In its turn, France saw 10,000 of its men killed and 14,000 million
Poincaré francs spent, from which Syria gained nothing at all. It saw
French prestige considerably weakened in the Near East, diplomatic
failures and irreparable losses, and above all the most inconsistent of
policies.

In 1920 Syria was the richest of the Arab regions, the best organised
for a free life. In 1939 it is the poorest, with the worst administration. In
1920 we had a king. France did not want him. So we formed a
democratic and constitutional republic. Once the republic was installed
and democracy established, the constitution was suspended and plans
are now being made to re-establish the monarchy.

In 1920 we proposed a treaty to France. But France preferred to impose
a unilateral regime upon us which then proved to be unsuccessful. So we
were invited to visit Paris to negotiate a treaty. Once the treaty was
concluded, signed and accepted by us, France no longer wanted it.

At the very beginning of 1920 Syria was a large and unified region. A
general then federated it. In 1925 another general reunited it, before
submitting it to further dismemberment. In 1936 it was reunited again,
this time contractually. But in 1939 it has been unilaterally refederated.
This is what the mandate did. It had but one clear feature: it had to
come to an end.

Franco-Syrian perspectives

It would be vain to deny the living conditions which French advice and
aid created in our country. I am only too pleased to discuss the benefits
of the French presence in Syria. In the first place I should recall the
French army which formed our battalion of the Levant, which will be
the nucleus of the Syrian army. Although one might have hoped for
these soldiers to be better prepared to serve their nation, one can only
admire the excellence of their training and the rigour of their discipline.
The Syrian gendarmerie was also reorganised very well by the French.
Similarly, we owe the construction of roads, a university and schools to French impetus. Our public education sector is the work of the French. France has educated the brightest of our young people in its universities, although it was careful not to promote these young people and this is a fault. French archaeologists have revealed our past to us and helped us to understand it. Many of our historic monuments have thus been saved; Aleppo and Damascus have each been endowed with unusual, though very interesting, museums.

Over these twenty years Syria — and by this I mean interior and Muslim Syria — has allowed itself with good grace to be impregnated with the customs, way of life and concepts which rule in France and which the French take with them wherever they go. In Damascus it is not in the cut of clothing, in the hairstyles or baring of the head, that French influence is evident. Even less it is seen in the bland society life and the taste of luxury. This influence is not visible on the surface but operates deep down. It is not manifested in the large numbers of brothels, the American cars choking the streets of our towns, the eccentricities of an unrestrained cosmopolitanism or flamboyant nudity; it has not made the fortune of pork-butchers, alcohol vendors, petrol importers, or the dispensers of modern comforts. It is detectable amongst us in the softness of our voices, our discreet looks, our measured gestures, our liking for silence and for work, our attachment to the land and to spiritual values. This penetration of French culture into our morals, our souks and our homes has not enriched any of us, but it has brought joy to a great many. In the towns of Damascus, Homs, Hama, Aleppo, Latakia and Suweida, the French language has progressed since the armistice. French has not been a means of earning a livelihood or gaining promotion for the Syrians of the interior, but a sort of open window to the West.

If I have emphasised this positive aspect of Franco-Syrian collaboration, it is only to show that it is possible and that it could be fruitful. I have always expressed the greatest contempt for defeatism, whichever side it comes from. Defeatism now threatens to obscure the future of Franco-Syrian relations. Some malevolent spirits see in the destruction of Syria a great victory for French politics. But I can assure these people that French influence in the Near East will not survive the ruin of our country. Others, more dangerous still, evoke pious and ancient traditions in a sentimental attempt to oppose the littoral against the interior, to the great advantage of the littoral. In doing so they are preparing the first stage of the elimination of the French from the Levant. As for us, we will continue to accord no more importance than necessary to a situation created in the aftermath of the war by a spirit made sombre by the past and destined sooner or later to disappear before the categorical imperatives of the economy and of life. In the
littoral we have recognised a separate state, but not a foreign state. The Lebanon will always be part of us, despite itself and despite ourselves.

We will not let ourselves be overcome by defeatism. Negations, attacks and sabotage are the weapons of mediocrity. All politics worthy of that name must be constructive, but no politics is immune from criticism.

There has been a problem in Syria since 1920 which could and should have been resolved the moment it arose. But France's hesitation in resolving it has given credence to its complexity. Yet it remains a simple, indeed the most simple, political problem in the Near East.

France has found itself in a mission of aid and assistance for twenty years in a country which has been declared independent and which belongs to no one but its inhabitants. The Syrian people have aspirations and rights. France has interests and commitments. How can the aspirations and rights of the first be reconciled with the interests and commitments of the second?

This is the crux of the problem. If it has never been clearly stated, it is only because it has always been obscured by outdated concepts. If it has not yet been resolved, it is because it has only ever been considered obliquely. Theories have been brought into play when the facts should have been allowed to speak for themselves. The whims of the dead have been obeyed when the needs of the living should have been appreciated. Politicians have remained entrenched in an abolished order when they should have been trying to create a new one. They have been caught in the topography of villages and regions. They have devoted themselves to ethnography when they should have been making policies, to literature when they should have been forming an administration. Instead of regenerating agriculture, they have established red tape. But as soon as it is freed from passions and prejudices, the Syrian problem no longer presents any difficulties. Syrian rights and aspirations have been recognised by the international community as well as by France itself, since from 1920 Syria has been independent and as far as I am aware has never been transformed into a colony or protectorate.

Between Frenchmen and Syrians of goodwill, and by these I mean men who only have the national interest at heart, there should therefore be an implicit agreement. The Syrian question will be settled only if this implicit agreement is transformed into a concrete regime.

Those who fight the treaty have nothing to put in its place. During my stays in France I sometimes met people who told me they were against the treaty. I replied that I had no objection to their opinion, but would they please tell me how they envisaged putting an end to the current difficulties? My question was always met with a resounding silence.

The problem is that when it comes to Syrian matters, France has had
no precise doctrine. It has never known exactly what it should do in Syria, or what it should do with Syria. My personal impression from my visits to Paris is that we have nothing but friends in France. Our country has some very sincere friends, even amongst the ranks of those who fight us the hardest. Unfortunately too many people in France talk about the Syrian question and too few know what it is about. Men of religion concern themselves with economic issues, financiers with moral issues, soldiers with religious matters, novelists with military issues and all of them, without exception, concern themselves with the political issues surrounding the relations between France and Syria. This makes French opinion muddled; there is more interest in Syria in Turkey, in England, in Italy and even in Germany than there is in France, and the facts about Syria are better known in these countries. I can only deplore this fact.

People still believe that the treaty 'is the French in the sea'. Public opinion in France does not realise that it is the Mandate which had gradually eliminated the French from the Levant since its institution, that it is the Mandate which is incoherent, uncertain and dangerous. The treaty is the regime of order, stability and peace. Only the treaty can ensure lasting French influence in the Near East.

It was in France, too, that I was told: 'The treaty is very good. But the treaty is Léon Blum and the Popular Front. And we don't want them.' We should pity our country, for it has a strange power of evocation. It reminds the French all at once of Solomon, the Bible, a thousand and one nights, Godfrey of Bouillon, Léon Blum and a famous song from the Second Empire composed by Queen Hortense.

More than once I have had occasion to repeat that the idea of the mandate may have germinated spontaneously in the Wilsonian brain during the peace conference, but the same was not true of the treaty. The treaty sanctifies a policy inaugurated by Clemenceau which has been on the agenda since Henri de Jouvenel. The negotiators of the treaty were courageous enough to take responsibility for settling to the advantage of France and Syria a question which had been dragging on for 18 years.

The signatories of the texts which served as the Charter of Alliance were not only Viénot and de Martel, but also de Tessan, General Huntziger and Georges Bonnet himself. There was also a certain unanimity amongst the French on the necessity of concluding a treaty with Syria. However, the French could not agree on the fundamental stipulations of the contractual policy, nor on the procedure to follow to open negotiations. Three theses clashed: the Count de Martel opted for the most straightforward and direct procedure.

According to one view, since it is necessary to grant something to the Syrians at any price, at least let this be done using the people which
France itself had chosen to represent Syria. 'Make certain concessions to the Syrians,' said those who supported this theory, 'but let us make use of our friends to do it.' By 'friends of France' they meant men for whom they had personal likings or those who were supporters of the mandate. Right to the present day this point of view has not been adopted. For the treaty is not a tea-party between friends, but a lasting entente between two peoples. If these would-be 'friends' are not popular and enjoy no credit amongst the Syrian people, anything they are able to obtain will be unwelcome: negotiations with disappointments. Of the thousand categories invented by the mandate to distinguish Syrians, the most unfortunate and the most unjust of all are those of 'friends' or 'enemies' of France. For France has nothing but friends in Syria. And the most friendly group of all is the one which supports independence and Syrian unity; it is also the most important since it comprises 90 per cent of Syrians. Since when is friendship with France incompatible with love of one's own country or a higher level of education? The mandate reserved all its affection and favours for ignorant people, for mediocre old men.

A second view seems to be enjoying great popularity at the moment; it consists in placing the Franco-Syrian problem on the only terrain where France would definitely be beaten: that of astuteness. In order to have a treaty, of course, there must be two parties. This view attempts quite simply to remove the Syrian party; it would prepare a treaty and impose it afterwards on an assembly or assemblies which would be elected after legalities had been suspended. To do this they would first have to suspend the Syrian constitution (a constitution promulgated by France and which is more binding on France than the treaty; for this is one of its obligations inscribed in the mandate charter).

The pretext of defending the 'communities' would justify exceptional measures or infringements of the electoral regime. The communities would be given the impression that they were frustrated. All together they would cry out against the constitution and the laws and reclaim their 'autonomy'. And this country of three million inhabitants, so many parts of which have already been amputated, would once again be mutilated, divided and cut up and minced into an infinity of multicoloured autonomies based on mouhafazats and tribes, at the heart of which partisan, familial, feudal, sacerdotal and individual greed would clash. Thus they would be able to conduct 'good elections' with anti-constitutional legislation and obtain an assembly which would be given the comforting epithet 'reasonable'. And this reasonable assembly would ratify any treaty it was given.

One only has to analyse a project of this kind to see it in its true colours. It is not only immoral; above all it is useless. It has already been experimented with in a different form in 1932, when in order to
fill the ballot boxes, the Mandate rallied all the forces at its disposal: troops, dead men and absent friends. The result exceeded all expectations: in a chamber of 70 deputies there was a massive majority of 'moderates' and scarcely 16 nationalists. But the 56 'moderates' had no desire to oppose the wishes of more than three million Syrians, and when the treaty was submitted to them they voted nationalist. The 'moderate' chamber of 1932, like the nationalist chamber of 1936, was suspended by the high commissioner.

Experience has shown that in order to organise supervised elections it would be necessary to sacrifice a great deal of money which could be better spent elsewhere; it would also be necessary to mobilise the army with the risk that blood would be shed. All this to arrive at a negative result.

The only entente worthy of that name is one which is made between two free parties. Why use violence to obtain what can be gained by friendship? Why use disorder to realise what can be established within order and respect for the constitution?

The policy of collaboration as conceived in 1936 was established on two postulates: the first defines the Franco-Syrian problem. This can only be resolved if it is seen from its true perspective: that of friendship. The treaty is a simple matter of confidence; French policies in Syria must inspire confidence in the Syrians. The attitude of Syrians in all matters must inspire confidence in France. The salvation of both parties can only be assured at this price. A serious crisis of confidence and one which makes France disgusted with the Syrians and the Syrians with France will inevitably lead in the more or less short term to the departure of France from the Levant.

The second postulate serves as the guiding force of collaboration; it would be formulated as follows: Syrian aspirations and French interests may develop only within a system of mutual dependence. Anything which weakens Syria weakens the French position in the country. Anything affecting French interests will have repercussions on Syrian interests. It is understood that French objectives and Syrian objectives are the same: defence of Syria, its integrity and its independence.

The treaty of 1936 has been criticised for being incomplete, 'for having been botched up in twenty-four hours', for lacking foresight, for not taking sufficient account either of Syrian possibilities or French necessities. The truth is that the treaty of 1936 made a major contribution to cordial relations and mutual understanding. What we admitted in the agreements with M. de Tessan in 1937, and those with M. Bonnet in 1938, was the logical consequence of the spirit of the treaty of 1936. The best guarantee of the viability of a diplomatic act is the advantages gained for the two parties who put it into practice.

As long as there is some advantage to be gained, the clauses of the
treaty will be respected. Our agreements with M. de Tessan and M. Bonnet reinforced the foundations of Syrian independence. Syria also provided France with evidence of its good intentions and its support for the alliance. My attitude, and that of the Syrian parliament on 31 December, has been held against Syria. But in all fairness, we cannot forget the successive procrastinations which exasperated Syrian public opinion. The announcement by certain agencies that a commission of inquiry would be sent to Syria outraged many, including the high commission. Finally, let us not forget that I returned to Syria from France on three separate occasions with written promises that the treaty would be submitted to parliament on a certain date. And three times this promise was broken.

During my stay in Paris in 1938 we finalised a new Statute of Franco-Syrian alliance. I had assumed a delicate mission to win over French public opinion. All the extremists were against me. Nothing threatens a cause more than the follies of its defenders. Patiently I set about my task. I moved mountains. I negotiated with politicians, churchmen, financiers, the military, as well as with the Quai d'Orsay. Everything was accounted for; we had thought of everything and solved all problems. Everything was ready. On 14 November I signed a declaration with the French foreign minister Georges Bonnet, a declaration in which we recognised 'that it was in the interests of both parties to implement the statute defined by the treaty of 22 December 1936 and its supplementary and complementary acts as rapidly as possible'. Yet on the eve of its implementation French hesitation put an end to the contract. Everything was called into question once more.

An objective and open-minded examination of the causes of the failure of the agreement reveals both internal and political and even personal issues. I do not wish to discuss these here. There is also a rather specious psychological reason. This is connected with a traditional feeling of distrust. The first French parliamentarian to rage against pan-Arabism was Alphonse de Lamartine. Will the damage caused to Franco-Syrian relations by the Romantics and the Bible ever be recognised? In general French politicians do not like to hear talk of an Arab state in the Near East, not least because such a state might arouse North African interest. France has never forgotten that Britain negotiated with King Hussein during the war without its knowledge. As early as 25 December 1915 Raymond Poincaré noted that 'the great Arab empire means little to me and I fear its effect on our African colonies. I would rather it were never born.'

These Romantic fears have weighed heavily on French policies in the Near East and to some extent have determined its failures. Yet these fears are propagated by people who know nothing about the situation in the Near East. Well-informed Frenchmen who are proud of their
country’s knowledge, men like Massignon and Montagne, do not share these fears and quite rightly denounce them as shallow and dangerous. Let us suppose that a Syria entrusted to France were to be torn apart and reduced to dust; that in the regions of Jabal Druze, the Alawites and Jazira, every Arab was put to death, every Syrian consigned to the flames; that Aleppo was delivered to the Turks after Antioch and Alexandretta; that Damascus, which has laughed in the face of every invader for 4,000 years, were bled to death.

Do they really think they would be able to kill the Arab movement in this way? Do they believe that they would prevent Mecca, Medina, Cairo, Sanaa, Riyadh, Baghdad, Amman, Nablus and Jaffa from existing? Do they think they would prevent 500 million Muslims from facing an Arab city in their prayers and from speaking to their God in Arabic? Would they be able to erase every Muslim tradition which has anything to do with Damascus? Would they be able to stifle the spirit which ruled over the Mediterranean world in days gone by, and which has given humanity some of its finest concepts? Arabism is the most salient reality in the Near East. And Damascus is its soul. If Damascus is strangled, Arabism will still find a home in Baghdad, Cairo or Riyadh. Instead of developing in a country which is a friend and ally of France, the Arab movement will develop in countries where it has no influence, in countries whose attitude towards Syrians will make them enemies of France. And then all its fears will be realised. I am convinced that the only profitable policy for France in Syria is an Arab policy.

Objections have also been made to contractual policies on the grounds that they offer France no military guarantees. France, it is said, has assumed a heavy burden in its defence of Syria, for our country is fiercely coveted and has no army or natural strongholds of its own. Yet we have not given France enough recognition in this respect. To enable the territory to be usefully defended, French troops would require total freedom to establish themselves in Syria.

By means of a subtle and patient system of alliances, the Western democracies have managed to construct a defensive barrier in the eastern Mediterranean which stretches from the borders of Libya to the Dardanelles. With its railways, and those of Palestine, linking Cairo to Istanbul, Syria forms an important part of this barrier, and thanks to its air and naval bases, would allow strong combined action against the Axis powers. Others argue against the nationalist desire to limit the number of French troops stationed in certain areas, that this limitation would be contrary to the interests of Syria itself; for it would appear that there is a close link between defence preparations in times of peace and the use of force in time of war. For the troops to be able to operate usefully during a hypothetical attack on Syria, it would be necessary for them to be stationed close to essential transport networks.
I understand all this. With my country's interests uppermost in my mind, I feel no embarrassment in admitting that Syria has no army at the present time. Although it must have one at all costs, it is certain that a modern army - even assuming that we were able to maintain one - could not be improvised overnight. We would need a great deal of time, and above all the help of France, to establish one. This is a fact. I am therefore personally in favour of a reinforcement of the military clauses. Who says that Italy is not an independent nation? Yet there are five times more German soldiers in Italy than there are French soldiers in Syria. Who would deny that Britain is the proudest and freest of the Powers? And yet in times of conflict it is a Frenchman who assumes supreme command of its troops. These are the natural consequences of alliances. For I believe that the higher interests of the country must come before considerations of self-esteem and that as long as it is a question of effective defence of the independence, integrity and the unity of Syrian territory, the Syrian government should surrender all military issues to the French high command; on condition, of course, that Syrian sovereignty is respected in all parts of the country.

These sensible and just considerations are shared by a number of Syrians. Unfortunately public opinion must also be considered, and public opinion is suspicious. The reasons for this suspicion are fair enough: first of all Syria has never been defended by France. We have seen more troops and war machinery on our streets than on our borders. The mandate sacrificed more than 10,000 men in Syria. But every time an occasion has arisen where France could have defended the integrity of the territory from an external danger, France has capitulated. I know this is not the fault of the army but of politicians. Whatever the reasons, Syria retains bitter memories of territorial concessions imposed upon it in violation of formal commitments.

Secondly, public opinion has been made suspicious by the upsurge in autonomist agitation in those regions where the levers of command are not worked by Syrians, particularly in Jazira and in the Alawite region. On this point it is important to highlight the role sometimes played by interpreters attached to the officers of the SS. Some of them may be good and honest, but the majority are not. The least one can say is that only in rare cases are they actually from Syria and that very often they are growing rich at the expense of our country and the officer concerned. I have heard that some circles of the high commission are aware of this, and that M. Robert de Caix has actually seen them at work. The French authorities have sometimes admitted that the activities of local intermediaries and informers have confused matters. It is clear that the military question is not insoluble. But it has suffered a crisis of confidence. Its solution depends on the re-establishment of order and Syrian sovereignty in the provinces
threatened by external dangers. This leads us to the main problem. It is in the interests of France and Syria to understand this problem, which continues to hinder the natural development of events towards the restoration of their friendship: that of the minorities. I will take some time over this question, above all in order to clarify the facts.

The meaning of some terms is less important than their power of suggestion. The word 'minority' is endowed with a particular evocative power. For strong nations it means very little, except that it allows them to interfere in the affairs of a neighbouring state and take parts of it. However, weak nations, or those which have only recently come into existence, do not like to hear talk of minorities. For them the word sounds like a funeral march. When the problem of minorities is raised in a young state, it means that all around it knives are being sharpened, world peace is demanding a victim and the feast is being prepared.

No country has ever solicited the attention of the protectors of minorities as much as ours has. Protectors of former times include Nebuchadnezzar, Khosrow (father and son), Bohemond, Tancred, Baibars, Hulagu, Tamerlane and numerous other looters, pillagers and swordsmen of lesser calibre who have paid us visits over the years. The origin of the protection of minorities is lost in the mists of time. Old Charlemagne's services were called upon.

In the nineteenth century a letter to the Maronites was attributed to Saint Louis. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries five million men perished in the defence of the Christians of the Orient, allegedly persecuted by the Saracens. The result of these wars was Turkish hegemony in anterior Asia and the destruction of the only two Christian states in the Near East: the Byzantine Empire and the Kingdom of Armenia.

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries several crusades were conceived by visionaries which Europe, too preoccupied with its own misfortunes, rejected. The Christians of the Orient went unprotected, and this allowed them to develop, prosper and grow rich. In 1535, Francis I formed an alliance with Suleyman the Magnificent in order to hold the House of Austria in check; in Europe this was seen as the affirmation of European equilibrium. In the Orient, it is said, it was the origin of the capitulations.

Francis I also saw himself as the protector of the Protestants of Germany in opposition to Charles V. However, this did not prevent him from putting the same Protestants to death at home. The Reformation established the 'protection of minorities' in the West: for a century the most civilised countries in Europe fell victim to ferocious butchery. This lasted until the end of the eighteenth century. Greedy powers transferred the protection of minorities to Poland. Poland was finally chopped up and swallowed. The Congress of Vienna (1814-15)
included several clauses limiting the sovereignty of the states in matters of religious freedom. This Congress was the origin of a great number of European conflicts. Things were no better in the Orient. Russia wanted to seize the Straits: so it proclaimed itself protector of the minorities in Turkey. This protection was inaugurated by the treaty of Küçük Kaynarca in 1774 and ended with the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire. The peace conference imposed the protection of minorities on the newly created nations as a constraint; consequently these nations are threatened. One of their number, the richest of all, Czechoslovakia, has completely collapsed. This does little to reassure Poland, Romania, Yugoslavia and Greece, not least because new defenders have enthusiastically entered the stage. At the present time the Czechs and Slovaks are being subjected to particularly close protection: Albania and Islam have yet another protector (fascist Italy) which hardly gives them peace of mind. The problem of minorities today is a veritable bogey for all the states coveted by audacious and grasping powers.

For centuries this problem has done nothing but pit men against each other, tear whole peoples apart, sow the seeds of revolutions, provoke murders and assassinations and has weighed heavily on the future of nations. And yet no diplomat, politician, lawyer, ethnographer or philologist has ever been able to say precisely what ‘minority’ means. However, one thing can be said: it is always the minorities who pay. They have never gained anything from any of the solutions reached over the ages; indeed they have always been the first victims of the solution. The minorities for whom the most has been done (the Jews and the Armenians) have been the most persecuted of all.

The Frenchman arriving in Beirut, whether he is a high commissioner, general, industrialist, tourist or novelist, approaches our country with his mind filled with an imposing set of prejudices, errors, false images, outdated perceptions and literary clichés, which he finds it very hard to rid himself of. So he yields to a strange way of distinguishing, separating, differentiating and creating non-existent gulfs between Syrians. He finds himself lost in a ‘religious mosaic’. This expression should be clarified. Modern Syria is inhabited by around three million people, approximately 85 per cent of whom are Muslims; the ‘minorities’ are actually divided into several communities. Thus it is not Syria, but the minorities, which form a ‘mosaic’. This must be of great importance in any analysis of the subject. For the issue can be settled only within the national framework.

A second, no less important, point should be made. The issue of minorities in Syria is not a racial issue. Say what you will about these communities, we regard them as Arabs, as do famous scholars too. Little importance is attached to their distant origins; two facts are incontrovertible:
1. These communities speak nothing but Arabic.
2. They are native populations, authentic Syrians, who have always lived in Syria.

It would be particularly wrong and unjust, for example, to treat the Syriacs as intruders, even those who came to us from that part of Mesopotamia which has ceased to be Syrian. Not only in Jazira, but throughout Syria and all Arab countries, these Syriacs should be considered at home. We owe them some of the greatest Arab scholars, the Caliphs' best physicians, ministers, poets and translators of Greek philosophy.

So it is in the authentically Syrian and Arab regions that anti-national agitation is developing. The national government has no complaints about the non-native communities. I must pay particular homage to the Armenians. Matured by long and miserable experiences, they have over the past years been the Syrians who have been the most loyal and public-spirited in their attitude and behaviour. Syria has adopted them, will look after them and is proud of them.

The question of minorities in our country is not like that of Poland, Romania, Yugoslavia or Hungary. We have no quarrels with other nations regarding ethnic or religious groups. The problem of minorities in Syria is therefore essentially a problem of internal administration. It is the result of a situation created in certain peripheral provinces by the ill-tempered feelings of local powers against Damascus.

The day Syria's accession to sovereignty was first discussed France insisted that effective guarantees be given to all Syrians, without exception, on issues concerning freedom of conscience. We knew how much French opinion was attached to the respect of this generous ideal, which France has spread throughout the world. And we granted all the guarantees asked of us without hesitation. We made a contract to ensure equality before the law and the enjoyment of the same civil and political rights for all Syrians, assuring everyone that there would be no inequality on the basis of religion, race, creed or language, proclaiming an absolute right to freedom of conscience for all. Our constitution obliges the state to respect all creeds and religions established in the country, to guarantee all populations, regardless of their religious beliefs, respect for their religious interests and their personal status, freedom of thought, and access to education and public employment.

Within the framework of Syrian unity, we allowed the provinces considerable freedom of action. Indeed, in my final agreements with M. Bonnet I gave Christians the power to challenge the canons and the laws of the Quran in all matters. I signed this agreement in the full knowledge that I was both serving my country and remaining faithful to the prescriptions of the Muslim religion.
Yet autonomist agitation continued to increase. Under the pretext that the administrators appointed by Damascus were disliked by the population and were not taking sufficient account of their 'aspirations', violent riots erupted in the provinces where autonomy had been a concept originally created by the mandate. Law and order, private property and public buildings were violated. Police officers were assassinated. The agitators took pride in insulting Syria and the Syrians. We were asked to change the administrator of Jazira. So we appointed a Christian administrator. Some time after his appointment he was 'kidnapped'. They proposed the appointment of a Druze administrator in Jabal Druze. We agreed. But still disorder increased.

We couldn't understand these events; after all, we had withdrawn our administrators and the prerogatives of the Syrian state had been passed to the delegate of the high commissioner. Scholarly memoranda were presented to the high commission, composed in the purest language of Racine, in which archaeology, history, geography and even theology were used to the advantage of the insurgents, and in which the necessity was demonstrated of sending back all Syrian functionaries to Damascus, until the very last guardian of the peace in the region had left. It was said that these memoranda expressed the 'aspirations' of the general population. Most of the time they were signed by illiterates.

Damascus and the nationalists were blamed for everything. If a village tyrant murdered two or three of his wives, it was only because he was reacting against the oppression of the Syrian government. If a greedy feudal lord terrorised his neighbours and damaged their crops, it could only be to defend his region from the grip of Damascus. Tax collectors were beaten up and judges driven out, and since Damascus bore the costs, these acts were met with applause.

What hurts us most of all is that the people who were manoeuvring behind the 'aspirations' of the insurgents used clever propaganda to assimilate the cause of the latter with that of France. Those who sought to break up Syria were friends of France and the patriotic Syrians were enemies of France. As regards the agitators behind the troubles, they massacred good men, drove away Syrian functionaries, ignored the law and welcomed the representatives of France; for they were friends. Instead of having France act as referee, they wanted it to take sides. But we saw France's mission in Syria as being to prepare the country for emancipation, to develop in the provinces the ideas of nationhood and fatherland, as well as a sense of duty. For us the regional problem is a problem of law and order, and above all a moral problem. The principle of order is not safeguarded by deciding the case in favour of disorder. Justice will not be assured if insubordination is allowed to develop.

Some circles continue to view the events of Jazira in terms of religion.
But this does not serve the autonomist cause. Indeed, the autonomists have statistics against them. According to official figures for 1938, Jazira has 105,513 inhabitants, of whom 77,443 are Muslims. The Christians, divided amongst ten communities, number some 25,000. Each community has a patriarch who speaks in its name; only one patriarch opposed the fatherland and Syrian unity. His followers in Jazira number 1,988, or less than 2 per cent of the total population. The statistics speak for themselves.

I would like to make it clear to Catholic circles who, fearful and suspicious, are fighting us in good faith, that Syrian nationalism is not of a religious nature. We are prepared to make any concessions, as long as they do not violate Syrian sovereignty and unity. We are in favour of absolute equality for all our citizens and in favour of total freedom of conscience. I should also like to say to these same Catholics that they will never obtain the same things from the French mandate as they will obtain from a free and united Syria. For the France of 1939 is not the France of the twelfth century. It is a power which has obligations towards Muslims and the presence of 30 million Muslims in its empire forces it to make special concessions to a religion as yet unravaged by atheism.

The campaigns organised against us have only served to reinforce the positions of an old reactionary element which we had succeeded in weakening. Nothing can be built upon fear and mistrust, for they are negative and destructive feelings.

Political as well as moral issues have prevented Syrians from agreeing to the severance of links between Damascus and the outlying regions. We are told that only the French presence in Syria can guarantee the integrity of our country. I will not disagree with this statement. But a French army of 13,000 or 14,000 men will never be able to defend a country like Syria unless Syrians themselves also participate in its defence. Unfortunately we know how much treaties are worth. What is needed is for Syria to be resolutely prepared to defend itself. We have worked for twenty years to create a national feeling in Syria. And now it is precisely this feeling which is being fought in the marches, the coveted border provinces, where such feelings should be most highly developed and deep-rooted. To protect Syria from external infiltration, the inhabitants of Damascus, Aleppo, Druze, the Alawites and Jazira, as different as they appear to be on the surface, must agree on certain basic principles, certain main ideas, or at least on the idea of a Syria they wish to defend, a fatherland they should respect. If this idea is ridiculed, if, under the pretext of loving their small region, they insult and seek to weaken the greater fatherland, Syria, reduced and squeezed between Anglo-Arab and Turkish blocs, will become tempting prey and will rapidly be sacrificed to world alliances and world peace. I admit
that some might not be in agreement with the national bloc in al-
Hasakah, Suweida and Latakia. But we cannot allow the Syrian flag to
be dragged through the mud by madmen.

If no government has yet been formed in Syria since February 1939, it
is because Syria wishes to leave the responsibility of the current policy
to its instigators and supporters.

Towards a new order

I have shown that the only durable, fair, harmonious and rational
formula is the one at which we have arrived. No other system would be
capable of withstanding the test of time and events. During my
negotiations I have tried to consider all opposing interests. Accords are
only worth anything if they are applied in a spirit of confidence. For it is
their spirit and not their letter which is important.

Syria has been subjected to more trials since the armistice than any
other Near Eastern country. All is not lost, however; there is room for
hope. The territory we have been left with, greater than the area
covered by Belgium, Holland and Switzerland put together, is a vast
playing-field for our young people and for their entrepreneurial spirit.
The Syrian soil is fertile; we produce cereals, cotton, fruit. We have oil.
Our artisans are some of the most ingenious in the world. Our people
are sober, tough, resigned and hard-working. Syrians are found all over
the world and everywhere they occupy important positions. The
spiritual forces of our country are intact. The past and the future are
ours. We have every reason to believe that Syria will survive. Even
though the feckless policies of the mandate have led to the loss of some
of our richest provinces and most of our wealth, Syria retains an
unshakeable desire for friendship and alliance with France. The Syrians
are wary of defeatism and, despite their present bewilderment, they will
not resort to acts of desperation.

Two interest blocs clash violently in relations between France and
Syria. On the one hand there are those who want peace and stability for
Syria, those who are for interdependent and mutually guaranteed
Franco-Syrian interests. On the other hand there are those who oppose
Syrian stability using every means at their disposal; they want neither
the French in Syria, nor a Syria which belongs to the Syrians. This
viewpoint is represented by various more or less neighbouring nations,
by quite considerable powers, by obtrusive mystics.

To achieve their aims, those forces working against France and Syria
at the same time speculate in the economic encirclement of Syria and
the development of disorder. One high commissioner with ambitions
prepared for the first eventuality by creating great works in the Syrian interior, and for the second by putting an end to the controversy which had compromised relations between France and Syria since 1920. The loss of Alexandretta and the new orientation of French policies posed new problems, the seriousness of which appeared to go unnoticed in French circles in Syria.

Never in the course of its history has Syria been as poor as it is now. France has spent 14,000 million Poincaré francs in Syria. No trace of this money remains. Syria’s people are predominantly farmers and craftsmen. France has never invested capital in agricultural ventures and the mandate has done nothing for our craftsmen. We know that the majority of French capital invested in Syria dates from before the World War.

It is also alleged that the Syrians complain that there are too many counsellors in Syria. Quite the contrary: I think there are too few. The ministry of economy alone requires at least another four: one for economic services, one for agriculture, one for hydraulic services and one for the craft industry.

It is necessary, however, for these counsellors to be technicians. Only then will they be able to serve France and Syria at the same time. Under a regime of independence, alliance and friendship, I believe that the greatest number of French functionaries would be engaged under the most advantageous conditions. Under a regime of distrust, uncertainty and the dismemberment of the country, collaboration is neither conceivable nor possible.

We have also been criticised for the administrators and director-generals we have appointed. Yet we did not have any better men at our disposal. The mandate had not prepared any competent men for us. Nevertheless, most of our appointments of young people have been successful.

The national government has one advantage which the Syrians will appreciate fully once the methods of the mandate are returned to. We have appointed various nationalists – that is only human and natural. But we have not sacked anyone, not even those who fought us and who have continued to use their positions to fight us in an underhand manner. We knew that the survival of these men depended on their jobs. Former regimes were cowardly. Under the pretext of making cuts, every year the civil service was reorganised and fathers of families left penniless, young people without work, and all because they had committed the crime of being nationalists. We have put an end to the dealings of interpreters, intermediaries and informers. Cutting the budget in order to justify acts of revenge is a hypocritical and diversionary tactic. It is not that there are too many employees in the Serail. The problem is that their work is badly distributed.
But the most astounding rumours spread about the national government are those regarding its financial administration. Tales and accounts devised by the leaders of this campaign have spread rapidly throughout Syria and the Lebanon, astonishing the population. Some have even reached France.

These rumours speak of the millions of Syrian pounds we have squandered, of astronomical deficits and fabulous sums of money, as well as of enormous credits advanced by the high commission from our share of the Common Interests. It is said that the Syrian nation has been robbed, frustrated and crushed under new taxes. But the reality is quite different. Since the establishment of the mandate, financial administration has never been so good, so healthy, indeed so prudent as under the national government.

Under the mandate the various different departments drew up the budget, supervised by the adviser. The adviser was not responsible, nor were the departments. The delegation could have intervened, but it had even less responsibility. All this ended in Beirut, and of course there was never any question of the high commission assuming the least responsibility in drawing up the budget, since there was a government with ministers in Damascus. All these obstacles hardly facilitated cuts in expenditure. Sometimes a whole year went by without the completion of the legal formalities for approving the budget.

We put an end to this state of affairs. We formed a responsible government which took initiatives and was able to make decisions. Our finances entered an era of prosperity they had never known before.

When we took power in 1936 the treasury's liquid assets could not even meet normal expenses. Former administrations had left the budget with a deficit of some 420,000 Syrian pounds. The Bank of Syria had advanced a loan of 345,000 Syrian pounds which had never been repaid. The administration's debt was 175,000 Syrian pounds. In 1937 and 1938 all of this deficit had been met, the Bank of Syria's loans repaid and the treasury's situation dramatically improved.

We have opened new schools, strengthened the police force and the gendarmerie, increased the salaries of civil servants by an average of 20 per cent. We have suffered the unfortunate consequences of devaluation, and increased the budgets of 1937 and 1938 by 35 per cent in relation to previous budgets without putting any extra burden on the taxpayer. We have not resorted to borrowing, nor any other measures. Even though taxable matter has increased from 100 to 150 per cent, we have not raised taxes.

Our budget assumed we would receive sums due to us from the re-evaluation of gold held by the Bank of Syria and from the administrative account of the Common Interests. Despite the fact that these sums, amounting to some 1,500,000 Syrian pounds, have never
been repaid, the government still managed to meet its commitments and put its plans into effect.

The sense of national and civic duty developed rapidly. Syrians had never before paid their taxes so promptly. It was because for the first time since the fall of King Faisal they felt at home in their rejuvenated and sovereign thousand-year-old homeland. The Syrian citizen felt that he was participating in the government of his country and was able to overcome the trials he had been subjected to by our alliance and friendship with France, trials which included the loss of Alexandretta and devaluation.

I have often heard it said that the Syrian nation is hard to govern. I disagree. Nations are generally ungovernable when they are kept idle or miserable. The mandate not only ignored Syrian aspirations, but Syrian needs too. My definition of government is as follows: to govern a people is to know how to keep them occupied. We have given the Syrian people an ideal and have challenged them to achieve it.

An independent and united nation, a balanced democracy, cannot be established overnight. We knew it would be no easy task. The great powers of Europe needed a thousand years to become established. Yet miracles were expected in Syria, and every day new obstacles threatened its future. Traditions, not laws alone, are responsible for maintaining harmonious relations between different powers.

The national government has started new traditions: parliamentary, administrative, even diplomatic traditions. Following the example of Iraq and Egypt, Syria enthusiastically carried out the primary prerogatives of sovereignty. During this period France's prestige increased considerably in the Near East. Its representatives were acclaimed in Cairo, Jerusalem, Baghdad and Jeddah. It regained pride of place amongst the Arabs and Muslims. The treaty has been responsible for France's independence in its relations with the Levant.

Peace now reigns on Syrian territory. But we are uneasy. No time could be more favourable for the implementation of a definitive contractual policy. The ball is in France's court. It would be far more useful if it were to show us goodwill than if it were to impose its will upon us.

I have noticed that some of those responsible for Syria's destiny are ruled by their feelings. In matters concerning relations between nations, particularly as far as rights and vital interests are concerned, all strictly personal matters - likes, dislikes and whims - should be ignored. Good feelings make bad policies.

The solutions currently adopted are circumstantial, provisional solutions, imposed under circumstances of angry tension. If their effects last they will seriously threaten not only the existence of Syria, but also France's primary position in the eastern Mediterranean. The political
situation in the Near East is as follows: France is in Syria despite its
great enemies, Germany and Italy. But even the powers which are
friendly to France are not particularly enthusiastic about its presence in
Syria. England and Turkey have not ceased trying to make it leave this
country since 1920.

So why does France insist on remaining in Syria, despite the wishes
of the Syrians, when they are offering it the opportunity to safeguard its
interests contractually?
The renaissance of the Arabs in recent history was the result of a tenacious and determined effort on the part of leading political figures in the early part of this century. Jamil Mardam Bey was one of those leaders who dominated the political scene in Syria throughout the 1930s and 1940s. He was also considered a prominent figure in the wider Arab political sphere. He was a major contributor to Syria’s independence and to the foundation of the Arab League.

Mardam Bey was born in Damascus in 1893. He received his primary and secondary education there. In 1909 he went to France to pursue his studies at the École des Sciences Politiques in Paris. He also enrolled in the Faculty of Agronomical Sciences intending eventually to manage and improve his agricultural property.

While in Paris, Mardam Bey joined with other young Arabs to form a secret society called al-Jamia al-Arabiya al-Fatat meaning ‘the young Arab association’. The year was 1911 and the aim was to fight Ottoman domination and liberate Arabs from foreign occupation. In 1913 al-Fatat organised a conference in Paris together with other Arab groups: al-Ahd and al-Istiqlal al-Arabi. Representatives from many Arab regions attended the conference. Their objective was to coordinate their efforts and specify their national claims. Mardam Bey was elected assistant secretary-general of what became known as the Arab Congress. A policy defining the claims and aspirations of the Arab nationalists was adopted. Their resolutions were communicated to the representatives of the Great Powers as well as to the Ottoman ambassador in Paris. This Congress was a turning-point in modern Arab history for it called the attention of the Great Powers and the Ottomans to the existence of an Arab nation which had been ignored and neglected for centuries.

In 1920, Mardam Bey returned to Syria. During his long stay in Europe, he had been delegated by the Arab Congress to visit Latin America and to contact the Syrian communities who had settled there. This was in 1917-18. When the Arab State of Syria was proclaimed in
March 1920, Mardam Bey was appointed deputy minister for foreign affairs in the government presided over by Hashem al-Atasi. This government lasted only three months, and in July 1920 the French entered Syria; King Faisal was forced to renounce his throne and leave the country. The Mandate was enforced. From this point on, and for the following 30 years, Mardam Bey's history ran parallel with the history of the Syrian struggle for independence.

After King Faisal's departure from Damascus, efforts were renewed for the development of a movement against French occupation. With other members of the Syrian resistance movement, Mardam Bey joined the People's Party which, together with other nationalist forces, launched a revolt in 1925. He joined the fighters in Jabal Druze and from there, together with Dr Abdel-Rahman al-Shahbandar, went on to Haifa when the French forces had surrounded the Jabal and ordered their arrest. They were both condemned to death in absentia by the French military court. In Haifa, the British authorities yielded to French demands, and Mardam Bey was arrested and extradited to face what the British knew to be his execution. After a few days' arrest in a Beirut prison, Mardam Bey was exiled to the Island of Arwad off the coast of Latakia. Other nationalists had preceded him. Dr al-Shahbandar was allowed by the British to seek refuge in Egypt while Sultan Pasha al-Atrash, leader of the revolt in Jabal Druze, sought asylum in Transjordan. An amnesty was subsequently granted by the French authorities and those under arrest were released.

The People's Party declined after the 1925 Revolt and nationalist leaders felt the need for the unification of those who opposed French occupation. A national front was formed in 1927 which was to become known as the National Bloc after Ibrahim Hanano from Aleppo, one of the leaders of the 1925 Revolt, joined it in 1930. Mardam Bey played a leading role in organising the National Bloc, which was to play a decisive part in all the political events that took place in Syria thereafter.

From 1922 to 1928 Mardam Bey was asked more than once to participate in the government. But, as this was tightly controlled by the mandatory power, he always refused, demanding as a condition for his participation the establishment of a democratic, sovereign and constitutional regime, which would recognise the principle of Syrian independence.

At last the mandatory power decided to grant Syria a constitutional regime. In 1928 Mardam Bey, with other Nationalists, was elected a member of a constituent assembly charged with drafting the constitution. He was active in promulgating the constitution which, in its final form, was democratic, republican and parliamentary. The French disapproved of its provisions and, as a result, the constitution was suspended and the assembly dismissed. This strengthened the National-
ists' belief that their struggle should be intensified. The French made another attempt at reconciliation and, after having imposed several puppet governments, called for elections in 1932. The Nationalists debated the French move and despite expectations of French intervention, decided to fight the elections. Mardam Bey was elected but, as few other Nationalists were, it fell to him to lead the opposition in parliament. Mohamad Ali al-Abed was elected president of the republic and Haqi al-Azm, who had close contacts with the Nationalists, was invited to form a government. Both al-Abed and al-Azm asked Mardam Bey to join the government on the grounds that the French authorities had promised to conclude a treaty with Syria which would recognise its independence and end the Mandate. After consultation with his Nationalist colleagues, Mardam Bey accepted and was appointed minister of finance. A year later, when he realised that the French would not keep their promise, he resigned his office. A few months later the French and that same government signed a treaty which was known as the Shabani Treaty (Shabani being the minister of education who had negotiated the treaty with the French). It was submitted to parliament for ratification, but Mardam Bey, though in a minority, managed to bring about its rejection. Parliament was dissolved and the constitution was yet again suspended.

Mardam Bey then devoted his time to defending the Syrian cause by undertaking extensive travel in the Arab world and in France. He visited Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Egypt and France during 1934. In that year he joined an all-Arab delegation specifically to bring the war between Saudi Arabia and Yemen to an end.

In January 1936 the National Bloc called for a national strike, and soon after Mardam Bey was arrested by the French authorities. Demonstrations ensued and the strike was sustained. Finally the French gave in and released the detainees. A delegation of Nationalists, Mardam Bey amongst them, went to Paris to open negotiations for a treaty of friendship and alliance which would put an end to the Mandate and recognise Syrian independence. The treaty was signed in September 1936.

The National Bloc delegation returned to Syria and elections were held, resulting in an overwhelming victory for the Nationalist candidates. Hashem al-Atasi was elected president of the republic, Fares al-Khoury president of the assembly and Mardam Bey was asked to form the government. This was the first nationalist government that had emanated from the will of the people. Mardam Bey held the premiership until February 1939, when he resigned following the French parliament's refusal to ratify the treaty of 1936. At his resignation he announced that, in view of the French attitude, the Nationalists were no longer in a position to carry on with any further negotiations. He
had tried very patiently to come to an understanding with France on the basis of reciprocal respect for national rights, but no French government seemed strong enough to take an initiative in this direction.

In 1940 and 1941 Mardam Bey travelled to Iraq and Saudi Arabia. In 1943 he was re-elected to parliament. He became foreign minister and acting prime minister, leading the country to independence in mid-1945. In October 1945, at the special request of King Farouk and King Abdel Aziz, Mardam Bey was delegated to Cairo and then to Riyadh as the representative of Syria. It was a crucial period in inter-Arab relations, and Cairo was the centre of Arab activities. His mission, which was originally limited to six months, was extended to October 1946. During that period he presided over the Arab League Council and was delegated as the Arab representative to Palestine to mediate between the different parties there.

In December 1946 he was recalled to the premiership. In 1947 new legislative elections were held. They were the first elections in independent Syria. After the elections he introduced major reforms in the system of government. In May 1948 he took over the ministry of defence alongside the premiership. During his office as minister of defence he brought about radical reforms in the organisation of the army.

He resigned in December 1948 after the defeat of the Arab armies in Palestine although the Syrians, who had just recovered their sovereignty and hardly had an adequate army, had fought to the best of their abilities. When the second truce was signed between the Arabs and Israel, Syria was in possession of seven Israeli military settlements; these were ceded by Husni al-Zaim after his coup d’état in 1949. Mardam Bey fiercely opposed the acceptance of the first and second truce, but was overruled by the other Arab states, in particular Egypt and Transjordan. The only staunch support he received was from the great Lebanese nationalist leader Riad al-Solh. Mardam Bey resigned because he firmly believed in the democratic practice of leaving office when the country had faced defeat.

He left Syria in January 1949 for Cairo, where he resided until his death in 1960. During that period many attempts were made to lure him back to active political life, but with his health in decline he felt he could not adequately discharge the duties expected of him. After the fall of the military regime of Adib Shishakli, both President Gamal Abdel Nasser and King Saud – who were deeply concerned about the political instability in Syria – succeeded in persuading the Syrian military to reinstate the constitutional regime in the country. The Egyptian president delegated Anwar al-Sadat and his assistant, Amin Shaker, to persuade Mardam Bey to return to Syria. The president was prepared to offer him Egyptian help and support if he agreed to stand for the
presidential elections. But Mardam Bey was adamant; he had already suffered his first heart attack. He counselled the return of Shukri al-Quwatli (who had been illegally ousted by a military coup) as a safeguard of democracy and constitutionality.

Mardam Bey then issued a declaration in which he officially announced his retirement from public life. This was in the summer of 1954, when he was only 61 years of age. In fact Mardam Bey is a unique example in modern Arab history of a politician retiring voluntarily at the height of his career. Though retired from active political life, he maintained contacts with leading Arab politicians and his counsel was frequently sought.

Jamil Mardam Bey died in Cairo on 30 March 1960 and was buried in Damascus.

Early history

From time immemorial and until the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, the name of Syria applied to a long rectangular territory that formed a bridge between Asia Minor, Mesopotamia and Africa. Today, the name Syria is given to an irregular, artificially drawn quadrilateral in western Asia. It extends over a surface area of 188,348 km. Its borders were established by the French in agreement with the British and the Turks after the First World War. The various agreements between these powers regarding the borders of Syria were formulated without the approval of, and even without consulting the Syrian people. Nor did they rest on any historic, ethnic, linguistic or geographical basis. The borders of Syria were drawn arbitrarily by the British and French who dismembered the Syrian territory during the term of their Mandate in the area. It should be noted, however, that the French ceded considerable parts of Syrian territory to Britain and Turkey with reluctance, for in 1914 the French had in mind a sphere of influence for themselves in the Arab world that would include all of ‘natural Syria’ in the event of the Ottoman Empire being dismantled.

Syria, which had been the cradle of many civilisations, fell prey to many conquests: yet the only one that left its mark was the Arab conquest. It was the Omayyads who established the Arab character of Syria for centuries to come.

Islam turned the largely nomadic Arabian peninsula into a powerful state that ruled a large part of the civilised world from Damascus. The Shepherd of the Hejaz, once established in Syria, became the founder of an empire.

In 1098 and for a period lasting over two centuries, the eastern
Mediterranean, particularly Syria and Egypt, confronted a coalesced Europe that was fiercely determined to carry on a religious struggle in the area with the intention of destroying what was seen as the enemy of Christendom. The Crusades ended in a lamentable defeat for Europe. Jerusalem was saved by Salah al-Din and access was once more opened to all religious shrines in the city. The Crusades thus created a schism between East and West which has prevailed in one form or another to this day, dominating both European and Arab minds since the eleventh century.

Capitulations

On 24 August 1516 the Ottoman Sultan Salim I seized Syria. Ottoman rule was to last until 30 October 1918. An important event took place shortly after the Ottomans seized Syria which was to have far-reaching and dire consequences for the Arab world centuries later. A treaty was signed in February 1535 between the Ottoman Sultan, Suleiman the Magnificent, and Francis I of France whereby certain privileges and immunities were granted to their subjects on a reciprocal basis. It marked the beginning of a system of privileges granted to foreign powers known as the Capitulations.

In the sixteenth century the Capitulations were basically trade treaties that guaranteed freedom of navigation, commerce and trade throughout the Ottoman Empire to the nation that was a signatory to an agreement. Although France, which for various inter-European reasons – mainly its feud with the Austrian Empire – was the first country to sign such a treaty, others followed. Britain obtained the same rights in 1580, Holland in 1612 and Austria in 1615.

From 1740 as the power of the Ottomans began to decline, the Capitulations provided an excuse for Western intervention in the internal affairs of their co-signatory. A new treaty called La Grande Capitulation was signed by Sultan Mahmoud I and the French king, Louis XV. It was not until 9 September 1914 that the Capitulations were unilaterally abrogated by Turkey, and contractually on 24 July 1923 in Lausanne. The damage resulting from the Capitulations was greater to the Arab areas under Ottoman suzerainty than to Turkey proper. The occupation by France and Britain of Syria, Iraq and other countries had at its roots the rights which the Western powers claimed for themselves in the Arab world under the Capitulations. Britain and France agreed to put an end to them in 1923 only after they had been assigned Mandates in the Arab world. Article 5 of the Mandate for Syria and Lebanon stipulated that the privileges and immunities of foreigners as formerly enjoyed by capitulation would not be applicable during the Mandate,
but that they would be 'immediately re-established' at the 'expiration of the mandate'. Thus the charter of the Mandate reserved for Britain and France the right to re-establish their privileged position in the future and, judging by the past, by force if necessary.

**Syria during the First World War**

When the First World War broke out, Turkey joined the central powers of Europe. The Western powers, particularly Britain whose routes to India were threatened, sought a *rapprochement* with the Arabs who formed almost half of the Ottoman Empire. An Arab nationalist movement had already been set in motion by Arab intellectuals at the end of the nineteenth century. By 1914, it had developed considerably in reaction to excesses perpetrated by the Turks, and in particular the military racist group of the Young Turks, against the Arab population.

As soon as Turkey declared war on Britain and France, the two countries took steps to solicit Arab support. Promises of independence were given, provided the Arabs helped the Allies to win the war. In March 1916 an agreement was reached between Sherif Husain, the Hashemite ruler of the Hejaz, and the British high commissioner in Egypt, Sir Henry MacMahon, providing for the establishment of an independent Arab state in the Arab territories occupied by Turkey. In June 1916, the Sherif proclaimed in Mecca the revolt of the Arabs against the Ottomans.

Meanwhile, and despite promises of independence to the Arabs, the British and French had agreed amongst themselves in 1916 to divide between them the territories that would be detached from the Ottoman Empire. In May 1916, a secret agreement (which was to become known as the Sykes–Picot Agreement) provided for a rather curious dismemberment of Arab territories under Ottoman occupation. There was to be a Blue Zone containing the Syrian Littoral to be given to France, a Red Zone including the whole of Mesopotamia to be given to Britain, and a Brown Zone including Palestine to be internationalised. As for the interior regions of Syria, these were divided into two zones: A of Arab sovereignty but under French influence, and B of Arab sovereignty but under British influence. The Agreement in fact ignored geographical as well as political, economic and psychological realities.

The *coup de grâce* followed. On 9 November 1917 the Balfour Declaration promising the establishment of a Jewish National Home in Palestine was made public. To the Arabs this declaration was reminiscent of a much-hated period in their history: the Crusades. Zionism was a Jewish version of an old European ideology. The importance of the Balfour Declaration to Syrian history is profound. It
not only led to its partition but also to the settlement of an alien people
to the detriment of the indigenous population and on a land which was
considered part of historical Syria. It was to lead to the establishment of
a state such as Herzl, the father of Zionism wanted: ‘an outpost’ of
Western imperialism. In a pamphlet named *The Jewish State*, he wrote:
'We will be the guardians . . . of civilisation against barbarism.'

Nevertheless, despite these machinations, Britain went on making
promises to the Arabs; emissaries were sent to Sherif Husain to allay his
fears. A joint Franco-British declaration issued on 11 November 1918
confirmed the Allies' determination to liberate the peoples who had
been oppressed by the Turks. Earlier, in January 1918, President Wilson
had called in his Fourteen Points for the recognition of the right of self-
determination of peoples; in particular, the twelfth point propounded
the unhindered development for the nationalities under Ottoman rule.

When the Peace Conference opened in Paris on 18 January 1919,
Prince Faisal, son of Sherif Husain, arrived at the head of an Arab
delegation to demand the fulfilment of the Allies' promises. He was well
received, but a month later the Peace Conference laid down the basis of
an equivocal and dangerous institution which was to have disastrous
consequences in the Arab world: the Mandate. President Wilson,
however, suggested that a Franco-British–Italian–American Commission
should visit Syria and report on public opinion there. After much delay
the Commission of Inquiry which finally arrived in Syria was to consist
of two Americans only, King and Crane.

The King–Crane Commission travelled through Syria (Greater Syria)
and consulted the population. The Syrians everywhere were unanimous
in upholding their right to independence. They were in favour of
national sovereignty, the unity of Syria and the total rejection of Zionist
claims based on the Balfour Declaration. The French Mandate, they told
the Commission, was totally unacceptable: in fact the very concept of
the Mandate was inadmissible. But the Syrian demands were com­
pletely ignored by the European powers. By the time the King–Crane
Commission had completed its mission and returned to Paris in
September, President Wilson, a man of great integrity, had reached the
end of his term of office and was not re-elected. The United States
subsequently withdrew from the Peace Conference, allowing Britain
and France more scope to carve up the Arab state which had been
declared in Syria soon after the Arab forces had entered Damascus. The
sovereignty of the Arab state was to extend over all Syrian territory, and
a government had actually been formed under the premiership of Rida
Pasha al-Rikabi. Also, a Syrian Congress was convened at the time the
King–Crane Commission was in Syria. But external pressure was
mounting and Faisal had to go back to Europe in September after
receiving a message from the British prime minister, Lloyd George,
informing him of an imminent new agreement between himself and the French prime minister, Clemenceau.

Upon arrival in England, Faisal learnt that the British had agreed to evacuate their positions in Syria and to be replaced by French troops, except in the four cities of Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and Hama. This clearly meant that Britain had agreed to give France a free hand in Syria in return for French recognition of a British take-over in Palestine and the inclusion of Mosul in the British sphere of influence. The British government informed Faisal that their troops would evacuate on 1 November 1919 and Lord Curzon, the foreign secretary, advised the prince to negotiate directly with Clemenceau if a military clash with the French was to be averted.

Faisal had no alternative but to go to Paris and try to come to some understanding with the French government. He was able, after much bargaining, to come to an agreement which would leave the prince in charge of an independent Arab state in the internal part of Syria, together with the four Qadas of Baalbek, Biqaa, Hasbaya and Rashayya. Faisal returned to Syria and tried hard to persuade the population to accept this project. He met with strong opposition, particularly after the fall of Clemenceau's government and its replacement with a right-wing government under the premiership of Millerand who was known for his imperialist views. Even before the fall of Clemenceau, the French government had made its aggressive intentions known by the appointment of General Gouraud, one of its leading military commanders, as high commissioner and commander of the French forces in the Levant. It had also decided to send a large French force to the area.

This mounting pressure from Britain and France prompted the Syrian Congress to affirm the independence of Syria within its natural frontiers and to demand the independence of Iraq with which Syria would ultimately federate. These pronouncements were rejected outright by the European powers. Lord Curzon issued a statement denying the right of any authority in Syria to concern itself with the status and future of Iraq and Palestine.

In April 1920 a conference was held in San Remo, the main participants being Britain, France, Italy and Japan. The Mandate over Syria, Lebanon and Cilesia was assigned to France, while the Mandate over Palestine and Transjordan was assigned to Britain. These territories were to be considered as Occupied Enemy Territories. The mandatory powers were to lay down the principles of the Mandate and submit them to the League of Nations for approval. Shortly after, French forces arrived in Lebanon with an international Mandate to carry out French plans for the area. On 14 July 1920 Gouraud presented King Faisal with an ultimatum demanding his formal acceptance of the Mandate, the abolition of military conscription, the demobilisation of Faisal's troops
and the handing over of the Riyaq–Aleppo railway to the French who would occupy the city of Aleppo. The currency issued by the French-owned Banque de Syrie would become the official currency of Syria and the opponents of France would be punished. Gouraud also demanded that King Faisal should not associate himself with a government formed from the ‘extremist elements’, namely that headed by Hashem al-Atasi.

Upon receipt of this ultimatum, King Faisal convened the Syrian Congress which reconfirmed its March resolution. It rejected any agreement or pact to which it was not a party. But the government, after consultations with the king, was forced by overwhelming odds to accept the terms of the ultimatum: the enemy was already in the backyard. The Congress objected to the government’s decision and even proposed to impeach it. There was no alternative left for King Faisal but to call for a temporary suspension of the Congress.

Despite the forced acquiescence of the government and King Faisal, General Gouraud ordered his troops to march on Syria under the pretext that the Syrian government’s acceptance of his ultimatum had not reached him. The Syrian minister of defence, Yousef al-Azma, gathered whatever forces there were and left for the front. The Syrian army, newly formed and ill-equipped, was soon to be defeated at Maysaloun around 30 km from Damascus on the road to Beirut, and al-Azma fell in battle. The memory of al-Azma is still celebrated yearly in Syria.

On 24 July 1920 Gouraud entered Damascus and asked to be taken to Salah al-Din’s tomb, where he is reported to have said: ‘Saladdin, we are back. My presence here consecrates the victory of the Cross over the Crescent.’ It is reported that Allenby had made a very similar statement upon entering Jerusalem two years before. Gouraud’s words, as Allenby’s before him, were not only insulting and provocative; they were above all a manifestation of the hatred harboured in Europe over centuries against the Arabs and Islam. A Mandate that inaugurated its days with such an attitude could expect nothing less than continuous trouble and resistance.

**Syria under the Mandate**

Article 22 (paragraph 4) of the Covenant of the League of Nations directly affected the fate of Syria and Lebanon as follows:

Certain communities formerly belonging to the Turkish Empire have reached a stage of development where their existence as independent nations can be provisionally recognised subject to the rendering of
administrative advice and assistance by a Mandatory until such a time as they are able to stand alone. The wishes of these communities must be a principle consideration in the selection of the Mandatory.

In the Mandate for Syria and Lebanon, which was approved by the League of Nations in 1923, Article 4 explicitly provided safeguards against cession of territory: The Mandatory shall be responsible for seeing that no part of the territory of Syria and Lebanon is ceded or leased or in any way placed under the control of a foreign Power. However, neither the Covenant of the League nor the Mandate safeguarded the territorial integrity of Syria; an important part of northern Syria, Cilicia, was ceded to the Turks in 1921. The frontier between Syria and Palestine was fixed by a Franco-British Convention in Paris on 23 December 1920 and later completed by the Paulet-Newcomb Agreement of 3 February 1922 and by a protocol signed in Paris in 1923. The Syro-Transjordan borders were determined by a protocol in 1931. The borders between Syria and Iraq had also been drawn by the Franco-British Convention of 1920, but were finally fixed by a commission presided over by a Swiss colonel in 1932 and approved by the Council of the League of Nations; this was later ratified by an Iraqi-French Agreement concluded by Nuri al-Said, foreign minister of Iraq and the French ambassador, Massigli, in 1933. Syria was shrinking every day. After Cilicia the Syro-Turkish frontier was constantly being trimmed until 1939 when France finally ceded Antioch and Alexandretta (with the rich plains of Amouk) to Turkey after painful negotiations which ended in an agreement signed on 23 June.

As though the dismemberment of historical Syria by the British and French was not enough, the new postwar Syrian state was also to be subjected to divisions.

In August 1920 Gouraud created, by a decree, the state of Greater Lebanon (with one million inhabitants), the state of the Alawites (with 400,000 inhabitants) and the autonomous state of Jabal Druze (with 40,000 inhabitants). This mountainous region of the Druze, situated south of Damascus, was given a 'constitution' by France and a treaty of alliance which included a provision forbidding the Druze to seek unity with Syria.

In 1920 the sanjak of Alexandretta was granted autonomy which was reinforced by a Franco-Turkish agreement. At no time was the indigenous population consulted. Thus Syria was divided into mini-states. Rebellions broke out everywhere: in Homs, Hama, Aleppo, Damascus, Jabal Druze and the Alawite region and culminated in the revolt of 1925–6. The French suffered heavy casualties in putting down a particularly violent revolt in Jabal Druze led by Sultan Pasha al-Atrash. Though the revolt was finally suppressed in 1926, order was not
effectively restored. The Syrians never ceased to clamour for unity and independence.

In 1927 the various political leaders in Syria joined forces and formed a National Front which became known as the National Bloc (al-Kutla al-Wataniah). The Bloc was neither a political party nor a militant resistance movement as traditionally known. It was a gathering of political leaders who decided to dissolve their parties and to work together within one body in order to bring the Mandate to an end and to achieve total independence for a unified Syria. The Bloc proclaimed a National Covenant (Mithaq Watani) which called for Arab unity and the establishment of a sovereign, unified and democratic republic in Syria. Years went by and no apparent change took place; the country remained divided into mini-states and governed by French-appointed officials. It was not until 1936 when the Bloc's delegation went to France for negotiations that things began to change. The delegation was composed of Fares al-Khoury, Jamil Mardam Bey, Saadallah al-Jabri, Moustafa al-Shihabi and Edmond Homsi and presided over by Hashem al-Atasi. After five months of arduous negotiations an agreement was reached in Paris and a treaty signed on 9 September 1936. The talks which had started with the French prime minister, Sarrault, were resumed with his successor, Leon Blum. In fact the change in the French government was a helpful factor in the negotiations since the Socialists were more prepared to terminate the Mandate than the right-wing elements in French politics. The chief negotiator on the French side was Viénnot, who established good relations with the Syrian side. The treaty, in its final form, contained a Charter of Alliance, a Military Convention, five Protocols and eleven Exchanges of Letters. All eventualities were discussed. It was to take effect soon after its ratification by both the Syrian and French parliaments.

The treaty was submitted to the Syrian parliament and was ratified unanimously on 20 December 1936. Meanwhile, no steps were taken by the French government to submit the treaty to the French parliament. Months went by; Blum's government was replaced, and still the treaty remained on the shelf. The Syrians were getting impatient and pressed for an answer. Finally, the French answered with the demand that certain aspects of the treaty relating to military matters and the status of the minorities be revised. Mardam Bey went back to France for more negotiations.

A violent campaign against the treaty was launched in France: books like those by Jérôme and Jean Tharaud, *Alerte en Syrie*, and by Marcel Homet, *L'Histoire secrète du traité Franco-Syrien*, were published and articles appeared continually in the press. Right-wing voices considered it a sell-out. French public opinion feared for France's North African territories. The military put pressure on the French government, and the
Zionists put pressure on Blum as Jamil Mardam Bey was to learn later from Benoist Méchin, the French historian and politician. Haim Weizmann had personally asked Blum, who had attended the first Zionist Congress in Basle, to shelve the treaty in the hope of extracting concessions from Syria over Zionist plans in Palestine. In fact Weizmann, who later became the first president of Israel, had sent messages on more than one occasion to the Syrian government offering his mediation with Blum for the ratification of the treaty, provided the Syrians were willing to accept a Zionist presence in Palestine. The Nationalists in Syria refused to discuss any such proposal since they considered Palestine part of their national territory.

The difficulties confronting the Nationalist government continued to mount. The Syrian government tried through many channels and actions to signal the dangers arising from French policy, but all in vain. The French kept on making more demands and asking for more concessions. An annexe to the treaty was signed in Paris on 12 December 1937 defining certain aspects which the French felt had been left vague. Still the treaty was not ratified by France. Jamil Mardam Bey went to France in August 1938 and negotiated with the French government. On 14 November he signed a declaration with Georges Bonnet, the French foreign minister, which admitted that it was in the interests of both parties to hasten the application of the treaty.

No sooner was this declaration published than the attacks on the treaty resumed with greater ferocity. On the eve of his departure from France, Mardam Bey submitted a memorandum to the French government signalling the dangers of these attacks and the difficulties that would arise in the future from the non-ratification of the treaty. A few days later, after his return to Damascus, he learnt that the French parliament had postponed the ratification of the treaty indefinitely. The news caused great consternation in Syria. Parliament met on 30 December and voted for resolutions that were to mark a new orientation in Syrian policy. The following motion was passed:

The Syrian Parliament regrets that the French government has proceeded without good reason to repudiate its engagements, and denounces its hesitations to ratify the Treaty. At the same time it demands of the Syrian government to safeguard all the rights tending to confirm the independence and unity of Syria and to adopt without delay firm measures to ensure the immediate transfer of all powers that have not yet devolved to it... Parliament hereby registers the declaration of the Prime Minister, Jamil Mardam Bey, to the effect that he considers all agreements and contracts which he has signed to be null and void.

Thus ended all attempts at contractual policy. The efforts to replace the Mandate by a negotiated agreement started by King Faisal and
followed up by the Nationalists for 20 years remained ineffective. A new era began with both parties free to pursue their own policies serving their own interests.
CHAP TER II

Syria and Vichy

Pu aux in Syria

The non-ratification of the Franco-Syrian Treaty by the French parliament was accompanied by yet another disaster, namely the replacement of Comte de Martel by Gabriel Pu aux as high commissioner to Syria and Lebanon. Pu aux was a member of a political species that one would have imagined to be extinct by the mid-twentieth century. In his memoirs, Deux Années au Levant Pu aux wrote of his dream to turn Syria and Lebanon into monarchies: 'Why not create in Syria a king?... A king assuming supreme power “à l’orientale” will not have to satisfy the demands of demagogues [nationalists]... But can the French Republic create monarchs?' Indeed he even took steps towards realising his project by contacting Fouad Hamza, a counsellor of King Abdul Aziz: 'I asked him if his master would consider giving Syria a king in the person of one of his sons.'

As for Lebanon, Pu aux had a thoroughly fanciful idea: 'I tended to think that Beirut, like Damascus, needed a monarch, not a Saudi, but a Christian prince... I did not believe I was yielding to a confessional bias in giving my preference to a Protestant prince, a Bernadotte of Sweden, for example.' Pu aux, who was himself a Protestant, pictured this ‘Grand Duke’ of Lebanon concluding a treaty of perpetual alliance with France and placing the government in the hands of a Frenchman of a ‘high administrative culture, still in his youth’. The appointment of Pu aux at such a critical period in history, when not only Franco-Syrian relations were at a crisis, but when grave events of potentially tragic proportions were happening in Europe and the world at large as well, was, to say the least a blunder.

Pu aux’s mission to Syria was short but eventful. Furnished with directives from the French government of Daladier to withhold the implementation of the treaty, Pu aux set about placing as many obstacles as possible in the way of the Nationalist government, so as to force it either to amend the treaty to France’s advantage or to admit
failure and withdraw. Puaux reported in his memoirs that Joseph Caillaux, the president of the finance committee in the Senate told him on the eve of his departure for Syria: 'Above all, no parliamentary regime.'

Shortly after his arrival in Beirut, Puaux broadcast a declaration addressed to the Syrian people on Radio Lebanon. In it he spoke of France's mission in Syria: 'France has received from the civilised world the mission to establish order and justice in these countries. It possesses all the means to accomplish this mission.' This was no doubt a threat that if the Syrians were averse to France's civilising mission, France had the power to implement it forcibly. He went on to say that all France demanded in the interests of its 'imperial policy' was Syria's total and durable loyalty. In return, France 'will grant you the right to have a proper national existence'. His assertion that France had a civilising mission and that it was only through France that the people of the area could acquire a right to nationhood was seen as insulting and as reflecting a bigoted mind which overlooked history. Syria had been the cradle of many civilisations and Damascus was the oldest capital in the world. To the Syrians, Puaux's remarks were convincing evidence that France was putting the clock back to the time when Gouraud and his forces had entered Damascus in 1920. Not surprisingly, they gave Puaux a hostile reception, which he describes as 'a cleverly staged frigidity... Not a living soul was to be seen in the streets. It seemed to me that I was leading a cavalry charge against an invisible enemy.'

Puaux's struggle with the Nationalists started almost immediately after he took office. He was supported in his mission by a team of French officials who were no less reactionary than himself. From the outset his statements were provocative and drew bitter criticism from the Nationalist government and the Syrian parliament. Puaux retaliated by mobilising the opponents of the National Bloc and creating dissension between the Alawites and the Druzes. He rescinded the decrees (issued after the treaty) which had united these two regions with the central government.

Immediately after he arrived, Puaux started issuing decrees without prior consultation with the Syrian government, which promptly responded by revoking them as having no validity. Puaux refused even to receive a memorandum to that effect presented by Jamil Mardam Bey to the French government. A clash was inevitable.

Following a tempestuous meeting between Mardam Bey and Puaux's deputy, de Hauteclouque, and General Keller, commander of the French forces in Damascus, who threatened to use military force, Mardam Bey, together with his cabinet, resigned. Puaux mentioned in his memoirs that he estimated that the presence of General Keller would have the
value of a salutary warning; since all 'Orientals think by images, it was essential to impose the image of the sabre on the mind of Jamil Mardam Bey.'

Mardam Bey was succeeded by another Nationalist, Lutfi al-Haffar, who held office for only 20 days. Al-Haffar wrote in his letter of resignation to the president that there was no useful purpose in remaining in power if the French pursued the policy of the Mandate. Soon after, the National Bloc broadcast a statement declaring that it was unable to assume the responsibility of government because of France's refusal to ratify the treaty and its insistence to follow a policy that precluded the recognition of Syrian independence. The Bloc considered the situation 'a national political crisis' and called upon the support of the Syrian people.

The country remained without a government for three weeks, after which an attempt was made by Nasuh al-Bukhari, an independent, to form one. It was a non-party government which accepted office on the understanding that the Franco-Syrian Treaty would take effect. Puaux, who had meanwhile reported back to Paris, suggested drastic amendments to the treaty on the pretext that the situation in Europe had become critical and that war seemed imminent. Both al-Bukhari and the president of the republic, Hashem al-Atasi, rejected Puaux's new proposals. Al-Bukhari resigned in May but continued as head of a caretaker government for a period of two months. During that period, Puaux was preparing for the breakup of Syrian unity by granting autonomous legislative powers to the Alawite and Druze regions. His decision was announced at the beginning of July. This was in total disregard of the constitution and in breach of the agreements entered into between France and Syria in 1936. The President al-Atasi, was faced with a fait accompli and had no alternative but to offer his resignation to parliament. Puaux, who had been studiously working for the abolition of the parliamentary regime in Syria, found the president's resignation a blessing. He suspended the constitution and informed parliament that its mandate was over. Puaux won his first battle, but the war continued unabated. He had come to Syria determined to defeat what he considered to be 'a national virus' and to prove that patriotism in Syria and Lebanon must somehow lean on France's friendship.

Puaux's next step was to invest himself with absolute power and to govern Syria directly, albeit through a Directorate under Bahij al-Khatib who was reputed to be a French stooge. Al-Khatib's collaboration with Puaux to restore a mandatory regime damaged his reputation even further, and an attempt was made on his life shortly after he took office. Some leading Nationalists, including Nabih and Adel al-Azma, were accused of involvement in the assassination plot. Seven people were
condemned to death and 20 others, including the brothers al-Azma, were given long prison sentences, but both Nabih and Adel had already sought refuge in Amman and Baghdad respectively. The French authorities under Puaux, having received the green light from France to stifle any Nationalist resistance, did not hesitate to use harsh and repressive measures to pre-empt any possible Nationalist resurgence.

The defeat of France in June 1940 and its weakened status did not influence Puaux to modify the unrepresentative system of government which he had created. In his view, a parliamentary system, far from bringing stability to an unsettled climate, would create more disruption. His view was probably coloured by his deep-seated hostility to the Nationalist movement whose manifest popularity he refused to recognise. This contradiction could be resolved only by fragmenting the National Bloc whenever possible or simply by suppressing parliamentary democracy. In either case, Puaux's conception of the nationalist 'virus' would be vindicated.

The assassination of al-Shahbandar

Puaux had his opportunity to strike at the Nationalists when, on 6 July 1940, Dr Abdel Rahman al-Shahbandar was assassinated. Al-Shahbandar had been a supporter of King Faisal, who had appointed him minister of foreign affairs in 1920. He participated in the 1925 Revolt against the French and escaped to Egypt, where he practised medicine in the Israelite Hospital at Ghamra in Cairo. He was allowed to return to Syria only when a general amnesty was proclaimed by the Mardam Bey government in 1937. After his return to Syria, al-Shahbandar criticised the treaty of 1936 and attacked the National Bloc for having concluded it. He had always been considered by the French authorities to be a British 'agent' and his opposition to the treaty was equally considered to be 'inspired' by the British.

To Puaux and the French military authorities in Syria the assassination was a blessing in disguise which they set about exploiting in furtherance of their goal of discrediting the Nationalists. On the day of the assassination, Puaux, who was in Beirut, sent a telegram to his government saying that al-Shahbandar, the principal rival of the National Bloc, whose links with the 'Services Britanniques' were well known, had been assassinated by an 'unknown', but added that it was manifestly a political crime whose authors should be sought in Nationalist circles. Puaux had made up his mind even before going back to Damascus to incriminate the Nationalists. He found a natural ally in the supporters of al-Shahbandar, whose only means of gaining
Syria and Vichy

political ground was by vilifying the Bloc and its leaders. Indeed, immediately after al-Shahbandar was assassinated they accused the National Bloc of the crime.

In August, Puaux informed his government that five men had been arrested for the assassination of al-Shahbandar and that they were being interrogated to discover the identity of the instigators; he also informed his government that he was going to reinstate the special court of justice which had been created in 1925 and suspended in 1928. The court had been set up especially to pass sentence on those who had taken part in the revolt of 1925. It was the same court that had passed the death sentence on Mardam Bey as well as al-Shahbandar. The French government replied that it favoured the closure of the preliminary hearing 'par une ordonnance de non-lieu' and objected to the reinstatement of that court; but Puaux wrote back saying that it was too late for him to comply as he had already taken the necessary measures in line with his previous message.

In October Puaux informed his government that after the assassins had confessed, the family of al-Shahbandar incriminated some of the leaders of the Bloc by name and that by law they had to be prosecuted. In a later message, Puaux wrote that Saadallah al-Jabri, Jamil Mardam Bey and Lutfi al-Haffar had been charged but the authorities were unable to arrest them as they had fled the country. Again the French government replied that in their opinion 'judiciary proceedings would be misplaced'. But Puaux was determined to proceed with the trial on the grounds that a civil case had been brought by al-Shahbandar's family. The latter had also wanted to incriminate Shukri al-Quwatli, but the judge dropped the charge.

Contrary to what Puaux was asserting in his reports to his government that there were no significant reactions to the incrimination of the Nationalists, there was indeed a strong emotional reaction amongst nationalist circles not only in Syria but in other Arab countries, especially Lebanon and Iraq. There was a consensus in Arab nationalist opinion that what the French authorities were pursuing was not justice for a murder committed, but the trial of nationalism which they hoped to discredit. When Iraqi and Saudi representatives in Syria met Puaux to express their governments' concern over this matter, Puaux told them that it was no concern of theirs.

Jamil Mardam Bey was alerted by a certain Fouad that Puaux was about to bring charges against him and his companions. He contacted al-Haffar and al-Jabri and decided then and there to seek refuge in Iraq. Mardam Bey and al-Haffar left Damascus on 16 October by road through the desert, and had it not been for Mardam Bey's driver who had previously worked with the Iraqi Petroleum Company and so knew the road that ran along the pipeline, it would have been impossible for
them to avoid the French frontier posts. Al-Jabri left Aleppo via Deir-al-Zor. It was only a few hours before the warrant for their arrest was issued. Upon arrival in Baghdad, Mardam Bey sent a letter to his wife telling her that he was sorry to have left without informing her or saying goodbye as he had no time to go home before his departure.

The Nationalist leaders received a hero's welcome in Iraq. No sooner was the news of their arrival known in Mosul, on the way to Baghdad, than crowds gathered in a demonstration of welcome. Mardam Bey wrote: 'The people here received us with an overwhelming welcome and our hotel teems with delegations from all over Iraq.'

Meanwhile, in Damascus, criminal proceedings were initiated against them, and the date of the trial was fixed for the end of November. A very impressive team of lawyers from Lebanon, including such eminent political figures as Habib Abi-Shahla, Edmond Rabbat and Emile Lahoud together with Sabri al-Assali and Naim Antaki from Syria, volunteered to defend the Nationalists. Antaki, who occupied a high position in the British-controlled Iraqi Petroleum Company, was threatened with dismissal if he participated in the defence. Under pressure and with the full agreement of the Nationalists, he bowed out.

Shukri al-Quwatli, who had not left Damascus, contacted the great Lebanese leader Riad al-Solh in Beirut and together they undertook to provide the best legal aid possible. The Nationalists in both Syria and Lebanon realised that the whole Nationalist movement was in danger and so presented a common front to save it. What transpired at the trial confirmed the Nationalists' belief in their leaders' innocence and that coercive methods of interrogation were used to implicate them.

The preliminary hearing took place on 9 December, when the date of the trial was fixed for 19 December. Gardener, the British consul in Syria, claimed in a report to the Foreign Office: 'The atmosphere is tense as political parties regard it as a struggle between two parties and by extension between us and the Axis since latter support Nationalist Bloc while Shahbandar had known pro-British sentiments.' It is worth noting in this connection that the British were never able to substantiate their allegation that the Nationalist Bloc was supported by the Axis powers. On the other hand, there is evidence in the official British records of British support for al-Shahbandar's followers. They not only enjoyed the moral support of the British, but also their financial support. This is clearly stated in a Foreign Office memorandum dated 10 May 1941: 'Gardener was told at the time of our decision to pay money to the Shahbandar Party, though he was warned not to admit to any knowledge of what was being done. We are inclined therefore to think that what Gardener means is that a regular subsidy should be paid to Shahbandar Party, whereas of course all that we had done so far is to make one lump-sum payment.'
The trial opened on 18 December 1940 amid strong emotions. The lawyer defending the Nationalists, Ihsan al-Sharif, wrote to Mardam Bey about the first hearing: 'The public investigation threw light on important factors that had not been clarified or registered in the preliminary investigations that were published.' Al-Sharif went on to say that the intervention of the government during the investigation was made evident.

Bahij al-Khatib and Khalil Rifaat, an official in the Syrian police, went to see Assassa, the prime suspect, and told him that if he gave the names of the real instigators, his sentence would be commuted. Assassa said in court that he had been subjected to various methods of torture and terror to force him to implicate the leaders of the Bloc in a plot. He had yielded to these pressures several days after his arrest and named Asem al-Naili (Mardam Bey's private secretary) as the instigator.

Another suspect, al-Ghandour, told the court an even more disturbing story. He said that he was taken from prison to the house of Nazih al-Muayyad, al-Shahbandar's brother-in-law, where he met Bahij al-Khatib and Safuh al-Muayyad (the head of the Syrian police appointed by Puaux). Safuh threatened to kill him if he did not incriminate Mardam Bey, al-Haffar and al-Jabri. He said that he was beaten by al-Khatib's cousin and that Safuh, after hurling all sorts of obscene insults at him, said: 'Assassa understood the matter in two words and despite all this beating you understand nothing.' Then al-Ghandour was officially interrogated, and his statement was taken down in al-Khatib's house.

The presiding judge, a Frenchman called Purifi, revealed that the documents he had before him corroborated the fact that, when the assassins had first been arrested and interrogated, no reference had been made by any of them to either Asem al-Naili or to any member of the National Bloc. The accusation against members of the Bloc had appeared several days later.

On the second day of the trial, Assassa declared unequivocally: 'I am the killer of al-Shahbandar.' At that point a curious incident occurred: Zaki al-Khatib, a supporter of al-Shahbandar who was then acting as legal adviser to the al-Shahbandar family, turned to Assassa and said: 'If you tell the truth and uncover the plot, the prosecution will drop the charge against you.' Assassa then turned to al-Shahbandar's son, Faisal, and asked him what he thought. Faisal replied in exactly the same words that he would drop the charge against him. It was then that Assassa took the oath on the Quran and told the court how the plot had been hatched between himself and his accomplices: Matouq, Harsho, Hafi and Tarabishi. They had planned, he said, to assassinate not only al-Shahbandar, but also Mardam Bey, as they considered both men
enemies of Islam. He added that when he realised during the initial investigation that the authorities were seeking to incriminate Mardam Bey, he thought that, by naming him, he would be fulfilling his initial mission by killing 'two birds with one stone'. On that occasion, he said, he had not been asked to take the oath, but now that he had sworn on the Quran, he could no longer tell lies. Following these revelations the public prosecutor withdrew the charges against al-Naili, Mardam Bey, al-Haffar and al-Jabri. Assassa and his accomplices were sentenced to death and were executed.

A footnote to this episode confirming French partisanship has recently been provided by Nasuh Babil, a Syrian journalist, in his memoirs published in Asbarq Al-Awsat newspaper in 1985. Babil, a staunch supporter of al-Shahbandar, whose newspaper Al-Ayyam was first to incriminate the Nationalists in 1940, recalls that before the trial the French security services approached Nazih al-Muayyad and said: 'Why don't you kill a Nationalist leader to avenge yourself for the killing of al-Shahbandar?'

Puaux's last days

The assassination of al-Shahbandar and its consequences were the most important events in Syria during 1940, but other changes were taking place as a result of the international situation and the war in Europe. After the Franco-German armistice in June 1940, the French had to review their policy vis-à-vis the territories under French control. Syria and Lebanon were situated in an area which was coveted by all the powers at war as well as by Turkey.

The Italians were trying to supplant the French; the Germans were promising independence; the Allies wanted to take over from Vichy; the Turks were hoping to extend their claims to northern Syria by promising their neutrality to both sides. Soon after the Franco-German armistice was signed, an Italian Armistice Commission was sent to Syria, ostensibly to assess the military strength of France in Syria; but it also had another aim in mind, namely to establish contact with various Syrians to try to win them over to the Axis side. They met with little success, since the Italian occupation of Libya had proved a disastrous experience for the Arabs.

The Germans also sent representatives who fared better than the Italians because the Arab world had no first-hand knowledge of German occupation and because of Palestine, a card which the Germans played astutely. The other important factor contributing to the relative success of the Germans was that the Syrians had for years been
in direct conflict with France and had for some time felt affinity with their enemy's enemy. Add to this the French administration's highly provocative manner under Puaux, who went as far as to disregard the instructions of his own government which seemed aware of the dangers of his policy. The inept handling of the al-Shahbandar assassination incident was accompanied by the incarceration of a great number of Nationalists under various pretexts. When Vichy sent a message to Puaux asking him to proclaim an amnesty and to broaden the political franchise, Puaux opposed these suggestions as long as he could; he had to give in finally on the question of the political detainees under pressure from the National Bloc. Puaux's turn-about came after Shukri al-Quwatli had assembled representatives from various parts of Syria and Lebanon in Damascus who, with one voice, had threatened to appeal directly to Vichy.

On the question of broadening the political franchise, Puaux asked his government whether this meant lifting the state of siege or reinstating the constitution and the parliamentary regime. Vichy replied that the 'expression must be understood in its widest sense'. Puaux was then asked to study the matter and report back. It took him over a month to reply, during which time the French government had decided to replace him by Jean Chiappe. Still, he was urged by Vichy to send his proposals so that they might be discussed with his successor.

Puaux replied that a return to a constitutional regime was inopportune. He admitted that the Directorate was showing signs of fatigue and went on to describe how the director of finance was involved in the embezzlement of public funds, how the director of public works 'lacked activity' and how the director of education was unable to impose his authority on the intellectuals. As for Bahij al-Khatib, he had rendered himself 'vulnerable' by obtaining for himself the post of administrator in the petroleum companies, so that when he left the government, he would still have the security of a good job. Puaux therefore suggested 'reshuffling the Directorate', and the appointment of a personality to hold the title of 'Chef d'État' or 'Chef de Gouvernement'. Puaux was determined to keep the Directorate, but by 'giving up the practice of issuing legislative decrees, the High Commissioner would be making an apparent gesture of liberalism'. He added that no modification should be allowed to the texts issued by the high commissioner, that the state of siege should be maintained and that the high commissioner should be in charge of all economic matters. In short, what Puaux was suggesting was a cosmetic change.

Vichy replied that the new high commissioner would be empowered to make the necessary changes. Chiappe left France on 27 November, but failed to reach his destination. His plane was shot down off the coast of Italy. Vichy blamed the British who neither confirmed nor
denied the accusation. It seemed that the British, in a vain attempt to rally Puaux to their side, had promised him that if he should break with Vichy and allow the Turks to occupy the airfields of northern Syria, Britain would guarantee that 'the authority of France in the Levant would not be disputed'. Puaux confirmed in his memoirs that such a proposal was put to him by the British consul in Beirut, but that he had rejected it. General Henri Dentz was appointed high commissioner and Puaux left Syria in December 1940.

His period of office was marked by violence both internally and internationally. His dream of consolidating the power of France in Syria and Lebanon, of establishing monarchies and of destroying the Nationalists, came to nothing. He was thwarted by the tenacity of internal resistance as well as by international events.

Dentz in Syria

Dentz was not a stranger to Syria: he had previously been in charge of the services of information of the army of the Orient from 1923 to 1926. He had had the experience of witnessing the Syrian Revolt of 1925, and the situation at the end of 1940 was somewhat reminiscent of 1925. Shortly after his arrival, Dentz was faced with a popular outcry against severe shortages of bread, sugar and petrol which were partly due to increased consumption by an expanding French army stationed in Syria. The discontent was general; the economic situation was deteriorating and the state reserves were exhausted. Soon after taking office he wrote: 'I must absolutely win the battle of the wheat... and I have everyone against me... the population... the merchants... the English.' 7

Dentz's first task was to take emergency economic measures which included an onslaught on grain speculation, but prices of basic foodstuffs continued to rise. He tried hard to ease the economic situation but, given the inflated size of the French army and the complexity of the economic problems in wartime, Dentz was bound to fail. On the other hand, the Syrians did not make matters easy since they did not consider themselves party to the international conflict that had erupted in Europe and therefore did not feel in any way obliged to make sacrifices for a cause that did not concern them. Dentz realised that his economic measures were not sufficient to stem the rising tide of popular discontent and since, anyway, the Pétain government had already agreed to introduce political reform in Syria, he decided to put an end to the existing system of the Directorate.

Dentz's programme for political changes in Syria was not much
different from the cosmetic reforms suggested previously by Puaux, but his approach to the whole problem was more pragmatic. He wrote to Vichy that, due to external pressures in the form of British and German propaganda and to the mounting opposition to the existing form of government, the situation in Syria required the introduction of internal reforms without delay. He also said that the prevailing situation had made it possible for the National Bloc to ‘remount their troops’ and that they were capable of causing trouble. In his own view something more than a ‘replastering of the Directorate’ was needed.

In a report to the foreign ministry he dismissed the idea of a return to a parliamentary regime and suggested the formation of a strong government capable of rallying public opinion under the leadership of Hashem al-Atasi; he would be named Chef d’État and would be assisted by a directorate and a council of government that would include Bahij al-Khatib. Dentz went on to admit that his solution was not without risk and that, in order to make it palatable to the Syrians, the French would have to relinquish some of their existing control over decisions that would be taken by such a government. This solution, Dentz added, ‘would have the effect of neutralising the movement that is emerging and of averting clashes that might otherwise occur within a short space of time’.8

Essentially, Dentz’s proposals boiled down to the recognition of the Nationalists as a political force in Syrian politics. Whereas Puaux had consistently dismissed the Nationalists as unrepresentative and, by implication, considered that they could be discounted in any proposed reform, Dentz, in contrast, considered them to be the most influential party in Syria and that therefore their inclusion in any viable government was essential. At first, the French government’s comment on Dentz’s proposals showed sympathy with his line of thinking: ‘Initially, the project seems audacious. A reversal of our policy can only be justified if it allows us to rally to our cause one of the most influential parties and so broaden the scope of our authority.’ In the event, however, Vichy’s reply to Dentz was dismissive. The government considered his programme ‘too much of a makeshift’ and not conforming closely with the ‘essential principles’ of Maréchal Pétain’s policy. As for President al-Atasi being Chef d’État, the notion was unacceptable unless he confessed that ‘the theses he had lately championed were extreme’, and gave the French sufficient proof of the sincerity of his ‘conversion to sane concepts’.9 Vichy’s instructions were clear: no parliamentary regime, no cooperation with any party that did not espouse French thinking and no fundamental changes in the status quo. The tough policy of the Mandate was to be pursued with such modifications as necessary to make it appear less obtrusive.

The tough line adopted by Vichy may be attributed to the changes
that took place within the French government at the end of 1940, when Laval took over as foreign minister. The change in tone of the messages sent from Vichy to Dentz clearly reflected the change that had taken place in France. Whilst in October and November the messages were advising Puaux to adopt a more liberal policy, by January 1941 Dentz was being told to take a tough line. The new directives put Dentz in a difficult position. They allowed him hardly any room for manoeuvre at a time when pressure was mounting against him in Syria. The Nationalists had re-established themselves as the leading party after recovering from a series of misfortunes that had plagued them during the previous two years. Dentz was fully aware of this but he was not given the necessary power by his government to try to reach an understanding with the Bloc. Notwithstanding the constraints imposed on him, he made contact with the Syrians at all levels and, with the Vichy directives in mind, reported back saying that during the past few weeks he had met the ‘principal Syrian personalities’ and that his conclusions regarding an eventual reform were as follows:

1. The Nationalists and Hashem al-Atasi were too ‘intransigent’.
2. The Syrians were ‘unanimously’ prepared to collaborate sincerely with France. That they were opposed to a parliamentary system but desired a change of government.
3. There was no question of appointing a chef d’état.
4. There was no question of appointing a prime minister.
5. The only formula for government was the appointment of a secretary of state, assisted by three or four under-secretaries, under whose authority the directors of the civil servants would be organised.
6. The high commissioner would have to loosen his (tight) grip on such a government. This would entail the establishment of ‘a charter defining respectively the powers of the Mandatory and of the Syrian government’.10

This new formula was in stark contrast to Dentz’s initial proposals. In fact Dentz’s new programme was in no way different from the policy of direct rule of Puaux’s days.

The Nationalists regroup

Meanwhile, the Syrian Nationalists were reassembling their forces and stepping up their activities both inside Syria and in the rest of the Arab world. In Syria, Shukri al-Quwatli led the movement and was fast emerging as the leading figure. His own party, al-Istiqlal, which had broken away from the National Bloc in 1938, reunited with the Bloc in
1940. The presence of Saadallah al-Jabri and Jamil Mardam Bey in Iraq helped to establish links between the Syrian Nationalists and the other Arab nationalist movements.

The Nationalists had decided when war broke out in Europe not to create a situation that might endanger the territorial integrity of Syria. Contrary to the reports that Gardener was sending, which were based on information from the supporters of al-Shahbandar, the National Bloc did not support the Axis. On the contrary, the declarations of Mussolini concerning the revival of the Roman Empire and turning the Mediterranean basin into an Italian sphere of influence, disconcerted the Nationalists and frightened them away from the Axis. Similarly, they were suspicious of the British who had let them down after the First World War and who, the Arabs believed, were committed to creating a Jewish state on Arab soil. Their experience with France had left them very bitter. As for the Germans, there was an undisguised admiration for them amongst the rank and file of the National Bloc, if only because they had humiliated their French overlords; but the leaders were anti-Nazi, if not anti-German.

The position of the Bloc was made unequivocally clear by Sabri al-Asali. Speaking on behalf of Shukri al-Quwatli at a meeting of the Bloc in Damascus on 27 October 1940, he said:

We have promised to lead you to independence. We have faced France and struggled to obtain our rights through the 1936 Treaty. Today, tomorrow and in the future we will not retreat from our position. We have kept quiet in the recent past not through cowardice, but because the international situation necessitated our silence; and we will not allow anyone to exploit this to break up our ranks. Let everyone know that we are not supporters of any foreign power, whether British, German, Italian, French or other. We are working only for the interest of this nation and for the freedom of our people.

The truce between the Bloc and the French authorities in Syria which had been imposed by circumstances had now come to an end. The Nationalists started to adopt a more aggressive attitude in dealing with the French-appointed government and the French establishment. Moreover, the support of Iraq, Egypt and Saudi Arabia was actively sought by al-Jabri and Mardam Bey during their stay in Iraq.

Baghdad in late 1940 and early 1941 was the centre of Arab nationalist activities as the Iraqi government at that time had welcomed the political refugees from Syria, Palestine and Lebanon. The presence of Rashid Ali al-Gaytani in the government had dispelled Saudi misgivings about Iraq. It was then that Mardam Bey had the idea of mobilising the potential of such an assembly of Arab nationalists now gathered in Baghdad. The aim was to consolidate the existing
independence of such Arab countries as Egypt and Iraq and, more importantly, to promote the liberation of the Arab territories still under direct foreign rule. He discussed his plan with his Syrian colleagues and subsequently produced a draft project which was submitted to various Arab political figures for approval. Mardam Bey's plan sought to develop the Syrian nationalist movement into a wider Arab movement. The aim of this movement was to liberate the 'usurped Arab territories by every available means'. The first step towards achieving that goal was to hold a meeting of the foreign ministers of the independent Arab states: Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Egypt. At such a meeting their agreement would be sought to issue a joint declaration calling on the belligerent powers to refrain from turning Arab lands into a battlefield and to grant all Arab countries their full independence. In order to carry out this plan, Mardam Bey proposed the creation of a higher committee for the nationalists in Baghdad. A provisional committee was in fact formed. The Iraqi government's response was favourable and Mardam Bey was asked to discuss his project personally with King Abdel Aziz. The Iraqis promised to contact the Egyptian government themselves.

Mardam Bey left Baghdad for Riyadh in January 1941 at the invitation of the Saudi king. King Abdel Aziz, who had been deeply concerned by the events in Syria, gave a very warm welcome to Jamil Mardam Bey. Both men were old friends and Mardam Bey had a very special respect and admiration for the king who had unified the Arabian peninsula. The king, for his part, had great regard for the Syrian Nationalists and considered many of them his personal friends.

During his stay of several weeks in Riyadh, Mardam Bey discussed his plan with the king and succeeded in enlisting his support. The king was much concerned about the international situation and its repercussions on Arab affairs. He was particularly disturbed by the turn of events in Syria and advised caution in the Nationalists' dealings with the French to avoid creating a crisis which might precipitate the invasion of Syria by foreign troops. He promised to use his influence with the French to try to bring about changes agreeable to the Nationalists. He was also concerned by the news that was reaching him from Iraq about the resignation of the national government of Rashid Ali and asked Mardam Bey to try, on his return to Baghdad, to mediate between the Iraqi factions so that the situation would not change drastically. At the same time the king told Mardam Bey to go ahead with his plan for the creation of a national higher committee and to keep him informed of its progress.

After Mardam Bey's return to Baghdad in March 1941, he wrote to the king:

The idea of the creation of a national higher committee is spreading, and
I am preparing the ground in many private talks for its materialisation, and very soon I shall announce my plan to the media. I have had talks with many of those whom we have mentioned and all of them are agreeable to the idea. I will send to Your Majesty in the next post the relevant information that I will gather and hope to receive your approval before publicising the plan.

The seeds of a united Arab cooperation plan were sown, but further growth was arrested by events in Iraq.

At the end of March Taha al-Hashemi resigned as Iraqi prime minister and Rashid Ali formed the new government against the wishes of the regent and Nuri al-Said whom the British supported. A period of tension ensued in Iraq during which King Abdel Aziz, through his ambassador in Iraq, asked Mardam Bey to relay the following message to Rashid Ali. The message was to be delivered personally and verbally and not through any official channel. Mardam Bey was chosen because of his own personal standing and friendship with both the king and Rashid Ali. The contents of the message were recorded in an aide-mémoire by Mardam Bey dated 6 April 1941 as follows:

1. As he has previously counselled, His Majesty sees that every effort must be made to come to terms with the British, to refrain from publishing anything against Britain and to adhere to the Treaty.
2. No doubt Rashid Bey is aware of His Majesty's great pleasure at the unanimous support and confidence that the Iraqi people have given him.
3. His Majesty has delayed his official message of congratulations to prevent Rashid Ali's opponents from exploiting it by means of allegations of connivance between himself and Rashid Ali, it being known that His Majesty disapproved of Abdel Ilah's and Nuri's actions. The King insists that Rashid Ali should reach an understanding with the British as there is no other alternative for Iraq and the Arabs and that it is useless to pursue a different policy which might harm Arab interests and benefit others.
4. His Majesty cares very much for Iraq and also for those who are currently running it. He will use every means at his disposal to serve the interests of Iraq, those being identical with the interests of his own country.

Mardam Bey found himself at the beginning of April caught between two dangerous and potentially explosive situations. The national uprising in Iraq against the British was gaining ground and the situation in Syria had deteriorated to such an extent that military intervention seemed imminent. Nor was the news that was reaching him from Shukri al-Quwatli and Lutfi al-Haffar encouraging. They asked him to do all in his power to get the Saudis, the Iraqis and the Egyptians to put pressure on the French. For a while the efforts of Mardam Bey were beginning to bear fruit. King Abdel Aziz had already promised to help; the Iraqi government was also very responsive and the Egyptian reaction was
equally positive. But developments in Iraq prevented the three countries from taking joint action.

The national strike

In Syria civil unrest was growing. Dentz and the French government, while admitting the urgency of political reforms, had still not agreed on their final form. The French government feared a German military intervention which might provoke an invasion of Syria and Lebanon by the British and the Free French. It was not certain how Syria and other Arab countries might react. Though it realised that a continuing policy of suppression was politically unwise, it was not strong enough to take bold action. At the beginning of March 1941 the Directorate was still in power and no sign of real reforms was in sight. This inertia resulted in a general strike which sparked off demonstrations and violence. Letters from Shukri al-Quwatli and Lutfi al-Haffar to Mardam Bey described the situation in Syria.

In his letter dated 2 April 1941, al-Quwatli wrote:

Arrests are in their hundreds and the number of people searched for in their homes causing them to flee is over five hundred. The prisoners like Sobhi Kodmani an elderly man and our agents in the various quarters are being forced to do hard labour. There is much oppression, and injustice knows no bounds. Despite all this the nation is standing firm... The Senegalese are everywhere. The strike is general. The army and its tanks are in the streets. Yesterday there were casualties. All the Syrian towns are on strike... We have not yet seen any results from your hosts’ pressure on Vichy.

Al-Quwatli’s information tallied with a message from Dentz to Vichy. He wrote: 'The movement takes the habitual form of shutting down the souks and agitation in the streets. Acts of violence have become more serious and more frequent. The local police was supported from 2 March, by elements of the automitrailleuses and by Senegalese forces.'

Not only was the strike general in Syria, but Beirut also rallied to Syria’s call.

Faced with this new development, Dentz immediately made contacts with Syrian politicians to try to calm the situation as best he could. Since President al-Atasi was ruled out by Vichy, Dentz proposed Ata al-Ayoubi as head of government; he put to him his programme and asked for his cooperation. Al-Ayoubi had been head of a government that supervised the general elections in 1936 following the conclusion of the Franco-Syrian Treaty; he was also close to the National Bloc. So before replying to Dentz, he consulted with the leading members of the Bloc,
who asked him to go back to Dentz with counter-proposals. In a letter to Jamil Mardam Bey dated 3 April 1941 Lutfi al-Haffar described the different stages of Dentz's consultations. He wrote:

Ata al-Ayoubi . . . after negotiations and consultations with the Nationalists, Shukri Bey [al-Quwatli] and Fares Bey [al-Khour], presented a counter-proposal which was very moderate and went as far as postponing the resolution of important problems until a more favourable time. Al-Ayoubi demanded that the constitutional situation be restored and that Hashem al-Atasi be recalled by a simple exchange of letters with the High Commissioner. This would imply that al-Atasi's resignation in 1939 was invalid and that as the elected President he would merely be resuming his office after he had been deprived of his administrative and legislative powers by Puaux. He also demanded the return of the Alawite and Druze areas to their former status. Only then will al-Ayoubi form a government which would be responsible to the President.

When these negotiations failed, the French called upon al-Damad Ahmad Nami [Al-Damad was a man of Turkish origin, who could hardly speak Arabic and who had furthermore agreed to collaborate with the French at the time of the Revolt in 1925], who in turn proposed Khaled al-Azm as his prime minister. The latter then came to us with a written commission to form a government. We discovered that it was identical to that presented to Ata Bey. We advised him on a personal level to refuse. We explained to him the implication of associating himself with al-Damad. We have learned today that the High Commissioner went to see Hashem Bey [al-Atasi] in Homs to try to get his approval of al-Damad, but was unable to trick him. Hashem Bey then sent his son Adnan to relate to us what had transpired. Al-Azm has failed to obtain the approval of any of the Nationalists, but he is going ahead with the formation of a government without a head of state.

Dentz sent a telegram to Vichy saying that Ata al-Ayoubi 'having proved himself to be an instrument of the National Bloc, the envisaged combination becomes unrealisable'. He added that in view of persistent agitation he was taking the necessary measures, such as establishing a government with personalities loyal to France; he would reinforce the state of siege and place the agitators under house arrest. He also informed Vichy that he had decided to cut all inter-urban telephone communications, to forbid the movement of Syrians except those with a military pass, to close public places at 8 p.m. and to entrust the maintenance of public order to the military authorities.12

Despite all these measures the strike continued. Dentz then realised that he would have to come to terms with the Nationalists at some point, at least to the extent that would enable the strike to end; a modus vivendi, he reckoned, would bring some calm whilst the international situation remained unsettled. He then dropped al-Damad and asked Khaled al-Azm to form a government which would include members
sympathetic to the Bloc as well as representatives of the Alawites and the Druzes. Al-Azm recontacted the Nationalists for this purpose. Al-
Quwatli told him that although he would not give his blessing to any formula that was unconstitutional, he would be willing to call off the strike and give al-Azm a chance. Thereupon Dentz informed Vichy that the situation in Syria had deteriorated considerably with the death of 40 people and that he had therefore decided to drop al-Damad and issue three decrees as follows:

1. A decree appointing a head of government aided by a council of ministers.
2. A decree naming Khaled al-Azm as the head of the government.
3. A decree creating a ‘conseil d’état’ which – besides its contentious powers – would make laws. A French counsellor would figure as a government commissary.

Dentz then broadcast a declaration to the Syrians in which he stated that the independence of Syria remained the aim of Syrian aspirations to which France had ceaselessly subscribed. He added that an economic and social programme would be immediately implemented which would help to solve the problem of unemployment, food supply and agricultural production. Dentz asked for a broader collaboration that would ultimately lead Syria to independence. He declared that the Alawites and the Druzes, while preserving their status, would be represented in a consultative assembly which he proposed to form. He also proclaimed that the newly formed government would participate in the general organisation of the food supply in what concerned the Common Interests of Syria and Lebanon and would assume the management of the food supply for Syria.

Dentz’s declaration fell far short of Nationalist demands, but al-
Quwatli, being under the tremendous pressure of a state of siege, issued a declaration to the people calling off the strike. The declaration was both frank and realistic. He referred to the breakup of negotiations with the French and admitted that none of the Nationalists’ demands had been met, but promised to continue the struggle; he affirmed that he did not endorse the changes made by Dentz. Nevertheless, he urged the people to end the strike as it had caused them great hardship. Al-
Quwatli added that the Nationalists’ decision was made first and foremost to avoid further bloodshed caused by the repressive measures employed by the French military authorities; he also pointed out that the deteriorating international situation was another factor that had to be taken into consideration.

There had been indications that an Allied attack on Syria was imminent. Moreover rumours were rife that Britain, in an attempt to solicit Turkish help against a possible German occupation of Syria, had
promised Turkey more territory in northern Syria. To forestall such a move al-Quwatli told the American consul in Beirut that the Syrians and Iraqis, with whom he was in close touch, firmly believed that Turkey coveted north Syria and north Iraq.

By calling on the people to end the strike while declaring that the struggle was not over, the Nationalists were in effect offering a truce while leaving their options open; they refused to participate in the government proposed by Dentz but gave al-Azm the opportunity to prove himself and to carry out the promises he had made to al-Quwatli on the eve of his appointment, namely to secure the release of the political detainees and the control of the food supply.

The government of Khaled al-Azm

Khaled al-Azm took office on 5 April 1941 in a relatively calmer atmosphere than had existed for some time. The strike had ended after al-Quwatli's declaration, but the atmosphere remained tense, indicating that, should the government fail to act positively to relieve the hardship and privation of the people, disturbances would recur. Al-Azm's first task was to secure the release of the political detainees. He managed to release 26 out of 34; the remaining eight, including a leading Nationalist from Homs called Sulayman al-Masarani, were referred to the military courts. Al-Azm was also unable to secure the release of the student detainees. This triggered renewed student demonstrations shortly after his appointment. He also failed to take over effective management of the food supply because the French insisted on retaining control over supplies from al-Jazira which produced the bulk of Syria's wheat.

By the end of April the economic situation had deteriorated further; there was a shortage of food, and prices were soaring; civil disturbances flared up again. Dentz informed Vichy that serious trouble was arising in Hama and Aleppo and that much agitation reigned in most Syrian towns. Al-Azm himself realised that the situation had become untenable and so went to tell Dentz that he could not continue to govern as long as the French counsellors in Syria persisted in their obstructive policies.

Meanwhile, other important events were taking place. In April France withdrew from the League of Nations and this in itself negated the legality of France's status as a Mandatory. The Nationalists reacted by submitting a memorandum to Dentz early in May demanding a return to constitutionalism. Al-Quwatli and Fares al-Khouri, who presented the memorandum, told Dentz that, by withdrawing from the League of Nations, France had publicly dissociated itself from all its international commitments and therefore had no legal grounds for remaining in Syria. In consequence, France ceased to have any legitimate excuse for
preventing the Syrians from exercising their sovereign rights – a state of affairs that could compromise Syria’s territorial integrity. In fact this was no exaggeration for as they spoke (and unbeknown to them), the French ambassador in Turkey alerted Vichy that Turkey saw France’s withdrawal from the League as a forfeiture of its mandatory rights, adding that in all his conversations with Turkish personalities ‘one discerns a real displeasure against France, holding it responsible for increasing the dangers of a military operation’.14

Events in Iraq and their repercussions in Syria

The Nationalists in Syria were particularly aware of the dangerous situation that had been created in Iraq, where the nationalist government of Rashid Ali had taken power. They knew that the British would not easily accept a nationalist take-over in an Arab country and that a military clash might well take place, which in its turn would have repercussions in Syria.

Rashid Ali’s government found overwhelming support from all sections of the Syrian population who voiced their solidarity with it through public demonstrations; as Dentz reported to Vichy: ‘The events in Iraq provoke in Syria as in Lebanon a vivid agitation. The Iraqi cause is presented as being that of all the Arabs and the struggle in Baghdad as the prelude to their liberation.’14

The Nationalist leadership in Syria were deeply worried about the turn of events in Iraq. They were kept abreast of developments by Jamil Mardam Bey and Saadallah al-Jabri who were still in Iraq. Nothing in their reports called for optimism. Mardam Bey sent a letter to King Abdel Aziz and a similar one to Shukri al-Quwatli, informing them of his contacts with both Rashid Ali and the British ambassador to Iraq. Mardam Bey wrote to the king that he had been in constant touch with the king’s representative in Baghdad and had asked him to convey to the king his discussions with the British ambassador and with Rashid Ali and to tell him of his ‘pessimism’ despite appearances of friendliness between the two sides. In his letter dated 6 May 1941 Mardam Bey wrote:

1. Events have developed quickly and have resulted in the military battles that we are witnessing now. As for the present situation, I believe that it can only be solved by military force and all that is being said about mediation and conciliation is nothing but a distraction.
2. Naji Shawkat, the minister of defence, left for Ankara to contact the Germans and the Turks. I met him yesterday before his departure and I also met the Turkish and French ambassadors. I understand that until now the Iraqi government has not received any firm assurances regarding
Turkey's definitive position. The Iraqi government has not been able to obtain an unequivocal pledge from Germany or, as it is said, the Axis Powers.

3. The government here had first decided to send Jamil al-Rawi to meet Your Majesty but then thought of sending one of its members, Naji al-Suweidi. He visited me this morning and informed me that he was leaving this afternoon to meet you. He asked my opinion about your attitude and I said to him: (a) I believe His Majesty wishes to avoid problems and has no inclination to put himself in an awkward position because the conflict has developed rapidly and has become difficult to comprehend even by those of us who have been watching the crisis from the outset; (b) His Majesty is certain to ask you about relations with the Axis Powers and any pledges by the Axis Powers and whether these concern other Arab countries or only Iraq. He will also want to know what form of aid will the Axis Powers offer and over what period of time, seeing that the military clash has started five days ago with no sign of support or even a declaration coming from them. Moreover, His Majesty will be astonished to learn that Iraq had actually embarked on a clash with Britain before receiving definitive pledges from the Axis Powers considering these powers have been courting Iraq and wishing it to take action in return for certain commitments towards the Arab countries. But now it seems that Iraq is courting the Axis Powers, and I am afraid that the latter will exploit the situation to their advantage and make demands and secure for themselves benefits in the Arab countries exceeding those made by Britain.

Mardam Bey's report to his colleagues in Syria on the situation in Iraq alerted them to the danger of an invasion of their country by the Allies sooner than expected.

Mardam Bey's letter to King Ibn Saud proves that the accession of Rashid Ali to the government was in no way accomplished with the connivance of the Germans. Rashid Ali's movement was a purely Arab nationalist endeavour to free the country from its ties with an imperialist power. He had unfortunately miscalculated and did not take into account Iraq's importance to British interests. For the British the loss of Iraq would have meant the loss of the Arabian peninsula and the routes of communication with their empire. They could not afford to give in. The military action taken by Britain to defeat Rashid Ali's government was a warning to all Arab nationalists that they would not be allowed to pursue a similar path with impunity.
NOTES

1. MAE, vol. 26, 6 July 1940.
2. Ibid., 11 August 1940.
3. Ibid., 21 October 1940.
4. FO 371/27329, 10 May 1941.
5. MAE, vol. 26, 26 October 1940.
6. Ibid.
7. MAE, vol. 37, 10 January 1941.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 16 January 1941.
10. Ibid., 27 January 1941.
11. Ibid., 18 March 1941.
12. Ibid., 2 April 1941.
14. MAE, vol. 37, 4 May 1941.
CHAPTER III

Syria and the Free French

Prelude to invasion

During 1940 the war situation in Europe had deteriorated sharply for the Allies. Metropolitan France had come under German control. This left the French colonies and mandated territories in a state of uncertainty, at least from the military standpoint, though legally their international status remained unchanged. In Syria, Dentz, with three divisions at his disposal, continued to serve the government of Vichy. With the war spreading rapidly southwards, the British had by November 1940 become deeply concerned about a possible future occupation of Syria and Lebanon by the Axis. But as British troops were already overextended, the cooperation of Turkey in an eventual invasion of these countries became an increasingly attractive proposition. In such a scheme, Turkey would occupy north Syria, including Aleppo, with Britain entering the area from the south. The drawback of this plan from the British viewpoint was that collusion with the Turks involving the cession of Syrian territory to Turkey would alienate the Arab world whose goodwill the British were anxious to maintain during a critical period of the war. But as the threat of an Axis occupation of Syria was not imminent, the British played for time in their exchanges with the Turks; they would not urge the Turks to occupy Syria earlier than need be, but kept up military conversations with them about ways of safeguarding Turkish interests in the railway communications via Aleppo. In the words of a senior British official: 'Britain should not... give the Turks any encouragement to occupy Syria now. If drastic action has to be taken in Syria before we are in a position to spare the troops for the purpose we shall no doubt have to try to persuade the Turkish government to occupy Syria.' In fact Turkey was tempted enough to have three divisions on its border with Syria at the time.1

General Charles de Gaulle, who got wind of Anglo-Turkish contingency plans, impressed upon the British that the Free French expected to participate in the occupation of the Levant. By May 1941 the military
situation of the Allies in the Mediterranean had deteriorated further: the Axis were advancing in North Africa; Greece had fallen; Crete had been attacked and, in Syria, the Vichy government had offered landing facilities for German aircraft. Khaled al-Azm protested strongly to Dentz against German use of Syrian airfields as this would invite British bombing raids. An Axis occupation of Syria was becoming a real possibility and therefore had to be forestalled. The granting of landing facilities by Vichy provided the justification for an early Allied invasion of Syria and Lebanon. The Free French would join the British in the action. From the British point of view, Free French participation was necessary as British forces were too thin on the ground to ensure a decisive victory over Vichy forces alone. Moreover, Turkey had not given a firm commitment to join in the action. It was also politically desirable to allay General de Gaulle's profound suspicions of British ambitions in Syria and Lebanon.

But the Turkish option was not abandoned. Just a few days before the invasion was due to be launched, the British ambassador in Ankara actually encouraged Turkey to occupy Aleppo and the surrounding districts as a temporary measure. He suggested to the Turkish minister of foreign affairs that he could justify Turkey's military intervention vis-à-vis the Axis on the grounds that Turkey would be 'holding Aleppo in order to prevent the British from doing so'. The British had no illusions that once Turkey had occupied Aleppo it would not leave it. In the event, Turkey declined the action advocated by Britain for fear of getting embroiled in a war with France and Germany, but kept strong forces on the frontier with Syria. Britain urged Turkey to give maximum publicity to Turkish troop concentrations on the border, but the Turks preferred to let 'the information leak out'.

General de Gaulle and his representative in Cairo, General Catroux, would have dearly liked to see the Free French take unilateral action, but Vichy's troops in Syria were a force to be reckoned with. Moreover, there were no indications to suggest that Vichy troops would defect en masse at the sight of Free French soldiers appearing at the borders of Syria. In fact there was evidence that Vichy troops were indeed loyal to the legendary Maréchal Pétain and hostile to the 'rebel' de Gaulle. Only Colonel (later General) Collet defected with his Circassian cavalry.

**Allied invasion and Proclamation of Independence**

The invasion of Syria and Lebanon under the command of General Wilson was launched on 8 June 1941. After fierce fighting an armistice agreement was signed on 14 July between the British and Vichy
commands. Before the outbreak of hostilities, the Allies felt that it was essential to gain the goodwill of the Arabs at the start of military operations. The inhabitants were not party to the conflict, and the attendant sacrifices and hardships that they would have to endure were bound to breed resentment, perhaps even hostility, to the new invaders. A grand gesture of goodwill had to be made to them, and what more meaningful gesture than a proclamation by the Allies guaranteeing the independence of Syria and Lebanon? After all, the Germans, who had no discreditable history in Arab lands had already promised them independence.

The two weeks preceding the invasion saw a flurry of correspondence between the British and Free French regarding the wording of the proclamation which General Catroux was to make on entering Syria.

General de Gaulle's initial approach to any such promise of independence showed hardly any understanding of Syrian national susceptibilities, as it put French public opinion above those of France's 'territories'. In a message to Churchill he stated: 'I shall proclaim and respect the [neutrality of the] States of the Levant in exchange for a treaty with them which will establish the right and special interests of France. Any policy which appeared to sacrifice these rights and interests would be dangerous from the point of view of the French opinion.'

Thus the independence of Syria was to be granted by means of a treaty which would in effect perpetuate France's supremacy in Syria and so carry the maximum appeal, not to Syrian aspirations, but to French public opinion. The British on the other hand, having vital interests in the Arab world, could not allow the French to act independently, neither at the outset nor in any future negotiations with the Syrians. So whilst they had to assure General de Gaulle of the intention to see France 'governing Syria', they also had to make sure that they would not 'be kept out of all negotiations and that the British would be consulted at all stages'. This was begrudgingly accepted by de Gaulle. British overall tutelage was succinctly put by Sir Miles Lampson, the British high commissioner in Egypt: 'Until the treaty or treaties are concluded and so long as British forces are in occupation of the country, decisions will rest with the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East.'

A formula was devised whereby the British government would add its guarantee simultaneously with the Free French proclamation of independence of Syria and Lebanon. The text of Catroux's proclamation was also reworded to make it more palatable to the Syrians and Lebanese. Catroux was to be referred to as delegate-general, not high commissioner, a title which was anathema to the Syrians.

On 8 June, General Catroux's proclamation was dropped in leaflets on Syria and Lebanon from the air. Excerpts are as follows:
Syrians and Lebanese I come to put an end to the Mandate and to proclaim you free and independent... Your independent and sovereign status will be guaranteed by a treaty in which our mutual relations will be defined. This treaty will be negotiated as soon as possible between your representatives and myself... Meanwhile, our mutual situation will be that of close allies united in the pursuit of a common ideal and objective.

Although the proclamation seemed unequivocal, it contained a loophole in the statement that independence was to be guaranteed by a treaty (to be negotiated) in which mutual relations would be defined. So in a sense, Syrian independence was to be conditional upon a mutually accepted treaty and the outcome of such a treaty would depend in practice on the identity of the representatives.

The British guarantee issued simultaneously declared that the British government 'support and associate themselves with the assurance of independence given' by General Catroux and that should the Syrians and the Lebanese 'support and join the Allies', the blockade would be lifted and they would enjoy admission into the sterling bloc.

Churchill, who was conscious of de Gaulle's deep-rooted suspicion of British ambitions in what de Gaulle considered to be France's vineyard, wrote him a personal letter of good wishes for success two days prior to the invasion confirming that Britain had 'sought no special advantages in the French Empire' but none the less making the point that their 'whole future policy in the Middle East must be conceived in terms of mutual trust and collaboration'. He added: 'Our policies towards the Arabs must run on parallel lines. We must not in any settlement of the Syrian question endanger the stability of the Middle East.'

This meant that, as Britain had an overriding interest in the Middle East, it could not allow the Free French a free hand in any future negotiations with Syria regarding the implementation of independence. Again, Churchill emphasised in his parliamentary speech on 10 June 1941 that Britain had no 'territorial designs in Syria or anywhere else in French territory' and that it would do all in its 'power to restore the freedom, independence and rights of France'.

However, a few days later, Anthony Eden, the foreign secretary, instructed the minister of state in Cairo, Oliver Lyttelton, that the British government

did not intend and have not promised that the Free French should virtually step into the place of the Dentz administration or that they should govern Syria in the name of France. HMG can accept no Free French policy which conflicts with its major decision, which is to achieve independence of Syria and all its peoples. At least while military operations continue, and probably until the necessary treaties have been signed and as agreed by HMG, British martial law already proclaimed will continue.
Thus Britain covertly reserved for itself the right to oversee any political arrangement between de Gaulle and the Syrians whilst overtly gratifying the General's pride, as reflected in Churchill's speech and other pronouncements by the British.

Hostilities ended with an Armistice Agreement signed on 14 July 1941 between British and Vichy representatives. Later, on 25 July an agreement was concluded between the British and the Free French settling all matters relating to the future management of the occupation. The British would retain overall command in military matters as long as their forces remained preponderant. The Free French would take charge of the civil administration, including internal security to which the British security service would be affiliated.

The Free French tried to persuade the Vichy soldiers to join them, but the vast majority preferred to sail home. The preponderance of British forces was retained and with it the exercise of military command in Syria and Lebanon. On 7 August, Lyttelton reassured de Gaulle in reference to their agreement that Britain had 'no interest in Syria or Lebanon except to win the war', and that it had no wish 'to encroach in any way upon the position of France. Both Free France and Great Britain are pledged to the independence of Syria and the Lebanon. When this essential step has been taken, and without prejudice to it, we freely admit that France should have the dominant privileged position in the Levant among all European nations.' General de Gaulle replied that he was happy 'that Great Britain recognises in advance the pre-eminent and privileged position of France'.

**British attitude to Syrian Nationalists**

Prior to the invasion of Syria, the British had been trying to gather information on the various political elements in order to weigh up their reaction in the event of military action being taken. But the information obtained was almost invariably misleading. The British consul's movements were restricted, and it appears from the various reports he sent back to London that his source of information was confined to the followers of al-Shahbandar who, as previously stated, were in British pay. They were a very embittered group following the death of their leader. The only possible avenue open to them for gaining power was British support and the only way they could obtain and foster this support was by feeding the British with misinformation designed to discredit the National Bloc and minimise its importance as a political force in Syria. Consequently, Gardener sent wild reports about the Nationalists such as their being in the pay of the Axis powers. On one occasion he reported that the 'Shahbandarists' had a greater following
in Syria than any other political group. In none of Gardener's reports throughout 1940 and 1941 was there any mention of a meeting between himself and any of the Nationalists. He even attributed their efforts to gain independence 'to be able to line their own pockets'. In another report Gardener wrote: 'To the Syrians, who like all Orientals, worship force and success, the defeat of the French seemed a heaven-sent opportunity for the true patriot to achieve Syrian aspirations and for the not so sincere patriot (who is remarkably common in Syria) to achieve his ends by playing the patriot.'

At no time and in none of his reports did Gardener ever once suggest that the Syrians might have been driven by a genuine desire for independence from foreign rule. One wonders whether Gardener's attitude was inspired by his personal prejudices or whether it was actually prompted by guidelines given him by his government upon his appointment. This might well have been the case considering that he was by no means the only British official to dismiss nationalism and downgrade nationalists wherever they were. It is interesting to note that on the one occasion when Gardener asked his government for leave to meet Shukri al-Quwatli on the prompting of the American consul in Beirut 'to ascertain his [al-Quwatli's] views', he was told by his superior in the Foreign Office that 'in view of extremist attitude of Shukri Quwatli, I fear that it would be useless to make any special efforts to win him round. If question of our attitude to future of Syria and Iraq is raised with you, you should take line that Arabs cannot have it both ways.' On another occasion when the British representative in Jeddah reported that King Ibn Saud considered al-Quwatli his 'oldest friend' who had only one aim, 'that of Syrian independence', Harold Caccia at the Foreign Office commented: 'It appears that S.Q. gave Ibn Saud an expensive motor car some 3 years ago with gold fittings etc. Though that... may have ingratiated him with Ibn Saud, it need not affect us. He well deserves his place on our blacklist.' Caccia's preposterous suggestion that al-Quwatli, who was of moderate means, had offered a bribe to King Ibn Saud, not only reflected the typically dismissive attitude of the British towards 'native' nationalists but, more importantly, it represented an indictment of the personal integrity of King ibn Saud, who was regarded by the British as their staunchest ally in the region.

Such misrepresentations of the Nationalists in Syria abound in the files of the Foreign Office and all point to one conclusion: that there was no room for accommodation in British policy for Nationalist demands. An example of this is given here at some length. In December 1940 Captain Holt, the oriental secretary in Baghdad, had a meeting with Jamil Mardam Bey, following which he reported Mardam Bey's 'chief points' as follows:
1. British victories in North Africa were a great relief to all Arabs.
2. No Arab people should do anything to cause embarrassment to Britain in her fight against Italy.
3. It was to be foreseen that France would soon decide either to join in with Germany or to go over to the Free French movement. In either event a new situation would be created in Syria and an understanding with the political leaders of Syria would probably be of some value to Britain.
4. The principal condition of collaboration would be some declaration by Great Britain of sympathy with Syrian aspirations. Given this, the Syrian leaders would be able to rally public opinion to support British policy.
5. He and his friends would be prepared to discuss details at any time.
6. He agreed that if the status quo was preserved in Syria it was ridiculous to suppose that Britain would go to war with France for the sake of Syrian liberties.9

Mardam Bey's personal minutes which were not destined for anybody's perusal, read as follows:

Captain Holt visited me last week. I mentioned to him what we demanded from Britain in the present situation. I explained to him that it was necessary to apply the White Paper in Palestine and form a national government there; also Syria should be helped to form an independent government. I told him that the idea of proclaiming Abdullah as King of Syria would not be endorsed by anyone in Syria. I told him that, if the Arabs had so far remained neutral and some of them had sympathised with the Germans, it was because of the British attitude; but if the British fulfil Arab demands and help the Arabs as they are helping the Turks, they would stand behind them and would promise to defend the Eastern front, because they would be defending their territory against the foreign power that attempts to occupy it. Thus the British government would cut its expenses in the East. The Arabs would be grateful and this would have an important moral and material significance for Britain. Holt seemed very interested by what I said and he asked me if he could transmit my conversation to his superiors and perhaps come back to me. I encouraged him by adding that your compliance with our demands after your victory on the Tripolitan front would not be interpreted as a sign of your weakness but of your strength and of your genuine desire to befriend the Arabs.

In comparing the two texts one notices the omissions and inaccuracies in Captain Holt's report. The most glaring omission concerned Palestine and Abdullah. Perhaps Holt himself believed that it was desirable to reach an understanding with the Nationalists but knew that were he to report the conversation faithfully, his government might discourage him from engaging in a dialogue with them, in the same way as it had discouraged Gardener from contacting Shukri al-Quwatli.
Free French attitude to Syrian Nationalists

General de Gaulle, after discussing the Syrian situation with his colleagues, made up his mind as to the line he was to take in Syria. In his Memoirs, *L'Appel*, he wrote: 'It seemed to us . . . that once the war was over, France would not keep the Mandate . . . Only one regime could substitute it, that of independence with French interests being, however, preserved. This is precisely what the Treaties of 1936 had foreseen.'

De Gaulle decided that his first political contact in Syria would be the Nationalists and specifically Jamil Mardam Bey, who had returned to Syria before the invasion. In his memoirs he wrote: 'I had at the beginning hoped to restore the previous state of affairs.' At the end of May, a close aide of de Gaulle, Coulet, had a secret meeting with Mardam Bey to discuss the Nationalists' demands. On 8 June the same aide sent a note to Mardam Bey which said: 'I have addressed to you the letter of General de Gaulle . . . I do not know if that document has reached you. It should answer the wish that you have expressed.' At the end of his letter, Coulet proposed the following: 'I think that you could, starting from 10 June, form a delegation of notables who will ask the Delegate and the General [Dentz] to put an end to this useless struggle. If necessary organise demonstrations.' Clearly, there was a strong hint of a deal to be struck between the Free French and the National Bloc.

De Gaulle's letter to Mardam Bey dated 6 June 1941 read as follows:

Upon entering Syria with the Forces of Free France, General Catroux will address a proclamation to the population. This proclamation, the spirit and terms of which I have approved, will be made in my name and in the name of Free France, that means France.

It will bring to the patriots, of whom you are one, the satisfaction of their dearest aspirations, in recognising before the people of the Levant the statute, guaranteed by treaty, of sovereign and independent people.

Thus will be consecrated the success of a cause to which you have so ardently and generously dedicated yourself. I am happy to inform you of this and I hope that you will discover, in this important event, a powerful incentive to collaborate with Free France and its representative General Catroux.

This initiative by de Gaulle was a recognition on his part that the French policy of the Mandate had failed and that France, rather than rule Syria through puppets, had better come to an understanding with the Nationalists. But General de Gaulle's letter was not delivered to Mardam Bey on time. Neither he nor de Gaulle nor even Catroux knew how or why it was withheld.

De Gaulle arrived in Damascus on 24 June 1941, and Catroux sent a note to Mardam Bey saying: 'General de Gaulle has arrived to
Damascus today. Wishing to meet with you, I propose that you come to my residence this afternoon.' Mardam Bey went to see de Gaulle with an open mind; he felt that the dialogue between the French authorities and the Nationalists which had been frozen for over three years might be resumed. His previous knowledge of Catroux and particularly of Viénot (who was advising de Gaulle on Syrian affairs) encouraged him to enter into talks with the Free French leadership.

De Gaulle opened the meeting with Mardam Bey by inquiring about Mardam Bey's reaction to the letter he had sent him on 6 June; on learning that Mardam Bey had not received it, he told him of its content. But as he had had no opportunity to discuss de Gaulle's message with his colleagues in the National Bloc, Mardam Bey asked de Gaulle to invite them to the meeting so that the matter could be discussed jointly. The meeting was extended and senior members of the Bloc joined Mardam Bey, de Gaulle and Catroux. It proved to be a useful meeting: general views were exchanged, the Nationalists emphasising the positive aspects of the Proclamation of Independence of 8 June, while the French stressed that the attainment of independence was to be without prejudice to French interests. The general impression left on the Nationalists was that for the first time since the socialist government of 1936, they had met a French leadership that had begun to realise the main problems of Syria and to understand Syria's desire for independence. The Syrian and French sides parted on the understanding that their discussions would be followed up with General Catroux after de Gaulle's departure.

On 1 July de Gaulle's letter of 6 June reached Mardam Bey, who then sent his official reply without delay on 2 July. It read:

You wished, through a letter dated 6 June, to inform me of Free France's firm decision to satisfy the national aspirations of the Syrian people. I have the honour of acknowledging receipt of this obliging communication, which has reached me on 1 July.

Already, before receiving this letter, I had the agreeable opportunity of reading General Catroux's proclamation, made in your name, and I discussed with him this document, which was confirmed by your Excellency during the meeting that took place in the Residence on 24 June 1941. As I have expressed to your Excellency, on behalf of all my colleagues who were present, it is with deep satisfaction that Syria welcomes your solemn declarations concerning independence and sovereignty.

I wish, in this letter, to renew those sentiments of gratitude. I hope that this happy event will not take long to be realised. I am persuaded that the new regime that will ensue will render the relations between France and Syria stronger and more intimate.

Mardam Bey's letter made no reference to any collaboration with the
Free French. The Nationalists knew from previous experience that they could not make commitments on the basis of generalities. Mardam Bey, with his personal experience of the treaty of 1936, knew that agreeing on general views was one thing and agreeing on details, whose implementation was the real test of independence, was quite a different matter. The Nationalists were not willing to get themselves involved in an academic exercise before knowing in detail the steps that the French were prepared to take for the implementation of their proclamation of Syria's independence.

The talks between Catroux and the Bloc continued throughout July 1941, and de Gaulle himself returned to Syria at the end of the month. He had several meetings with Mardam Bey, Hashem al-Atasi and others. On 29 July he delivered a speech at the University of Damascus at which all the leading political figures were present. In his speech de Gaulle reconfirmed his determination to see that 'a new regime be instituted in Syria. We have deemed that it was time for France, in accord with you, to put an end to the regime of the Mandate, "de traiter avec vous".' He also promised to preserve the integrity of Syria: 'I believe that the complete union of France and England, in what concerns the presence on the territory of the Levant, will contribute to the reinforcement in Syria and Lebanon of the certainty of preserving from the Tigris to the Mediterranean, from the frontiers of Transjordan to the frontiers of Turkey, their liberty and their national integrity.'

These last words were unmistakably meant as a warning to Emir Abdullah, who had ambitions of becoming king of Syria; but were they also addressed to the Turks and, indirectly, to the British? In making his first public speech in Syria de Gaulle had very much in mind the response of the Nationalists with whom he still wanted to come to an agreement despite, and probably because of, the anti-Nationalist line followed by the British representatives in Syria. Already de Gaulle's directives to Catroux upon entering Damascus had caused a furore in British military and diplomatic circles. The appointment of General Catroux as 'Commander-in-Chief of the Levant' was not consistent with the legitimacy of General Wilson's position. Furthermore, to instruct Catroux to exercise all powers hitherto exercised by the high commissioner conflicted with the Anglo-French arrangement that the final decision on all military aspects was to rest with General Wilson for the duration of hostilities.

General de Gaulle was fully aware of the British desire to have a say in all matters relating to Syria and Lebanon. He was profoundly suspicious of his ally's long-standing historical interest in the area and believed that despite all their official assurances as to the pre-eminent position of France in Syria, the British were in reality conniving at supplanting France. His determination to pursue negotiations with the
Bloc was to a large extent influenced by his suspicions of the British. He was well aware of the Nationalists' opposition to Britain on many fundamental issues, especially on Palestine, and that they would therefore be little disposed to plot with the British to supplant France in Syria.

De Gaulle's seemingly obsessive mistrust of the British was not irrational or unfounded. As mentioned earlier, de Gaulle knew that, for several months before the Allied invasion of Syria, Britain had been secretly preparing contingency plans to occupy Syria, not with Free France, the natural heir to Vichy dominion, but with Turkey. Indeed, it was on the initiative of de Gaulle, not the British, in early March 1941, that the Free French were allowed to join in the campaign. On a more objective level, the British attitude towards the inviolability of France's pre-eminence in Syria was by no means irreversible. In a message to the Lord Privy Seal, Churchill wrote: 'Tell Anthony [Eden] to be very stiff with de Gaulle, Catroux and Free French. They cannot be allowed to mess up our Syrian position and spoil our relation with Arabs. Their pretensions require to be sternly corrected, even use of force not being excluded. It is important to let them realise in good time that they will be made to obey. I do not see how they can resist.'

Before leaving Syria at the end of July, de Gaulle instructed Catroux to pursue the conversations with Mardam Bey and al-Atasi and not to 's'orienter' towards another solution unless their reservations prevented an agreement. Accordingly, Catroux pursued negotiations with the Bloc through its most influential leaders. The Bloc presented him with a 'programme d'action' for the effective realisation of Syrian independence. The programme laid particular stress on effective independence and on a return to a constitutional regime whose legitimate representatives would in due course negotiate a treaty with France. Furthermore, the Nationalists made the point that should such a treaty be concluded, it would have to be put to a referendum in Syria before ratification by a duly elected parliament.

Following the submission of the Nationalists' programme a meeting was held between Mardam Bey and General Catroux, who invited Mardam Bey to assume the office of Chef d'État. Mardam Bey said that before he could give an answer, he would first have to know all the terms and conditions attached to such an office. To this end he proposed that he should draft the letters that would be exchanged between the two parties. In his draft of Catroux's letter to himself, the general was to reaffirm the restoration of the full independence and sovereignty of Syria: 'this restoration, which has always been in the sight of French policy and which will allow Syria to have the constitution that will respond best to the needs of the country.' To ensure that France kept its promises, Catroux's letter would also have to
state that Syria ‘will enjoy, henceforward, the prerogatives of a sovereign state and will be able to proceed immediately with organising its foreign representation and a national army’. Mardam Bey believed firmly that at the end of the war the international situation would be radically changed and that a new League of Nations or a similar organisation would be formed. By establishing a national army, Syria would join the ranks of the Allies, thus ensuring the country’s access to the international community of nations.

In the draft of his own letter of acceptance, Mardam Bey again insisted that he would accept to assume the responsibilities of power as ‘Chef d’État, solely for the purpose of realising the independence of the country. Once the regime of independence is in place... the power would immediately be vested in the persons designated by constitutional suffrage.’ Mardam Bey went on to elaborate that the institutions ‘will essentially be democratic’.

The texts of both draft letters merely mentioned the conclusion of a treaty of friendship and alliance without giving any specifications. This was deliberate since the Nationalist programme required that the conclusion of a treaty be subject to a referendum.

The negotiations between Mardam Bey and Catroux did not proceed much further as Mardam Bey’s conditions were not acceptable to both the French and the British whose military position in North Africa was severely threatened by Rommel at the time. Colonel Collet, Catroux’s Délégué in Damascus, later told Mardam Bey in a private conversation that the British were utterly opposed to any form of Nationalist government, which in their view might endanger the war effort, and that the French had had to yield to their pressure. However, before dismissing the Nationalists outright, the French made a final attempt to persuade Hashem al-Atasi to form a government on the basis of the status quo ante, that is, the regime of the 1936 treaty. But the talks with al-Atasi collapsed just as they had done with Mardam Bey and for the same reasons. Meanwhile, the country had been governed by al-Azm’s government.

The government of al-Hasani

The British now began to apply pressure on Catroux to find an alternative to the Nationalists. The newly appointed British representative and head of the Spears Mission, General Sir Edward Spears, wrote to his government that ‘General Catroux has not even kept British authorities informed regarding his negotiations. In associating themselves so closely with Hashem bey the French have enhanced the reputation of a party who, on our arrival, were preparing to flee and
whose dishonesty in past administration is well known.\textsuperscript{11} It was obvious that the British were decidedly anti-Nationalist and that they would not hesitate to use their influence with the French to shun the Bloc.

In September Catroux informed General de Gaulle: 'The recall of Atasi would have meant, directly or indirectly, the recall to power of an intransigent nationalism and the marginalisation of our role in running affairs. The plan to instal Tageddine at the head of the State is taking off... and will be made public on the 16th instant.'\textsuperscript{12}

The choice of Sheikh Taj al-Din al-Hasani as head of state did not take the Nationalists completely by surprise. Taj al-Din had always been labelled as the man of the Mandate; he had previously accepted power when no other Syrian would. He was even in the pay of the French government as evidenced by a receipt signed by him personally and kept in the files of the Quai d'Orsay.\textsuperscript{13} A few weeks before the Syrian campaign was launched he had established good relations with the British through Gardener to secure their support in the event of an Allied occupation of Syria. In May Gardener had sent a message to the Foreign Office stating that the American consul in Beirut had 'visited head of Syrian government, Shukri Quwatli, Fakhri Baroudi and Sheikh Tajeddin. Sheikh said he was prepared to cooperate with British provided some definite plan could be agreed upon.' A week later Gardener cabled: 'My telegram No.48 last paragraph... At his request I met named person last night. He repeated his offer to cooperate fully... He claims to have a large following which I am inclined to believe. He might be able to collaborate with Shahbandar party... I suggest that this individual be referred to in future as my "second friend".'\textsuperscript{14}

The Nationalists were intrigued by Catroux's choice of Taj al-Din. Mardam Bey asked a senior aide to see Collet and find out from him why the French interrupted their talks with the Nationalists and chose Taj al-Din. Collet admitted that at first General de Gaulle was very keen to reach an agreement with the Nationalists but was unable to yield to their demands for two main reasons. For one, French public opinion in Metropolitan France could not be ignored. For another, British hostility towards the Nationalists could hardly be overlooked. Collet confided that the British had brought much pressure to bear on General Catroux to find an alternative to the Nationalists. The British, Collet added, had given Catroux to understand that should they disapprove of his choice they might well use the power they enjoyed under the Lyttelton–de Gaulle Agreement. They had also expressed their wish for a government that would include the followers of al-Shahbandar.

In the light of this and other information, the Nationalists came to the conclusion that the new situation required them to contend not only
with French imperialism but with British imperialism as well. There was no way at the time of ascertaining whether Collet was merely trying to absolve himself and the French from blame in Nationalist eyes. Today, however, with access to the official British documents, Collet’s information can be confirmed to have been true.

Taj al-Din assumed the presidency on 16 September 1941 by exchange of letters with Catroux. Catroux’s letter merely reiterated his proclamation of 8 June and invited Taj al-Din to accept the office of president and to form a government. It contained no specific commitments regarding the implementation of independence for Syria. Taj al-Din’s letter of acceptance was notable only for its servility.

The new president asked Hasan al-Hakim, a leading supporter of al-Shahbandar, to form a government. Al-Hakim was known in Syria as a supporter of Emir Abdullah’s claim to the Syrian throne. The Nationalists were made to step aside. The Allied authorities even invoked the state-of-war provision and asked them to discontinue their political activities. Al-Quwatli went on a trip to Saudi Arabia and Iraq; al-Jabri withdrew to Aleppo; President al-Atasi remained in Homs and Mardam Bey retired to his farm on the outskirts of Damascus.

Catroux induced the Syrian government to accept publicly the Proclamation of Independence of 8 June 1941, thereby giving it a bilateral character. On 4 October 1941 the government published a ministerial declaration endorsing the French formula in toto. But no one in Syria was impressed. The bulk of the population remained hostile to the French and suspicious of the British. As days went by, confidence in Catroux’s promise of independence was fading rapidly and trust in the British guarantee was likewise diminishing. Moreover, strict military control operating within the context of pledges for freedom and sovereignty was becoming increasingly unpalatable; the civil administration was showing signs of ineptitude and, not least, the economy was declining. Civil unrest appeared imminent.

Attitudes to Syrian independence

Following the appointment of the Syrian government, the British and the French were eager to solicit recognition of Syrian independence based on their proclamation. On 28 October Britain and its dominions accorded recognition by means of a message of congratulations from King George VI to the new president. The British foreign secretary, Anthony Eden, sent a similar message to the Syrian foreign minister, Faiz al-Khoury and appointed Spears minister plenipotentiary to Syria and Lebanon, while retaining the Spears Mission. This was a British Mission delegated to the Free French organisation everywhere; General
Spars had personally brought de Gaulle to London after the fall of France.

The Arab states were more circumspect. Egypt saw to it that the new Syrian minister of foreign affairs first addressed a formal letter to the Egyptian consul in which he confirmed his country's attainment of independence and its authority to conduct its own foreign affairs. In response, the Egyptian foreign minister sent a telegram to his Syrian counterpart offering congratulations on Syria's attainment of independence. No reference was made to the Syrian government as such and no congratulations were offered to any of its members; formal recognition was accorded by means of a message from the consul to the Syrian minister.

Saudi Arabia's approach was at first tentative. King Ibn Saud was not inclined to send a message to the Syrian president and told the British that he preferred to send his consul to call on the president as a mark of recognition. But the British could not consider such a gesture as remotely constituting recognition and suggested that the king follow the line taken by Egypt. So the Saudi foreign minister sent a telegram to his Syrian counterpart congratulating Syria on its attainment of independence. As in the Egyptian case, no reference was made to the Syrian government or to any of its members. Congratulations were offered to the 'Syrian State'.

Iraq was decidedly more critical than either Egypt or Saudi Arabia. In a communication to the British, Iraq stated that it would only recognise the independence of Syria 'but not the form of government set up by the Free French High Commissioner'. Nuri al-Said declared that he could 'never recognise as a president of a Syrian Republic a man who had been appointed without any reference to the wishes of the people'. At first, the British treated the Iraqi communication with contempt and decided not to reply pending United States recognition. Thereafter, the British would put pressure on the 'mulish' Nuri. It soon became clear that the United States would take much longer to decide on the issue than originally anticipated by Britain. Iraq could therefore no longer be ignored; in the words of Maurice Caccia of the Foreign Office: 'If the US Government are going to be sticky we might try again with Nuri.' British pressure on the Iraqi government began to mount. Meanwhile, Taj al-Din complained bitterly to the British that lack of recognition was undermining his position in so far as it signalled to the Arabs that his government was not legally constituted; he further pressed Britain to 'force' the Iraqis to extend recognition in order to scotch his opponents' attempt in Syria to weaken his power which, he pointed out, he had been using to carry out 'a policy of close collaboration and support of the Allies'.

The Iraqi government stood its ground, at one point suggesting to the
British that it would be willing to recognise Syrian independence provided the French publicly declared that the present government was only a temporary arrangement. It also expressed the view that the Taj government was extremely unpopular and ineffectual and that it was a great error of judgement not to replace it with a government formed under the old constitution. The British felt that not only was a French announcement declaring the present government as only temporary detrimental to Taj's authority, but also that in making it the French would be implying that Syrian independence was not real. A compromise formula was put forward by the British whereby the French would undertake that free elections would be held in Syria after the war, in exchange for Iraqi recognition. After further exchanges between Iraq and Britain, Nuri al-Said expressed in early June 1942 his willingness to accord recognition of Syrian independence as soon as the announcement regarding elections was made; this announcement should state clearly that elections would be held before the end of the year and that the elected parliament would enjoy full constitutional rights. But it was only in August 1943, when a constitutionally elected government came to power, that Iraq extended full and unconditional recognition of Syrian independence and its government.

The United States' attitude towards recognition turned out to be most awkward, obstructive and dilatory from the Allies' point of view. The main American reservations were as follows: the United States required firm assurances that its special rights established by the Franco-American Treaty of 1924 would not be undermined by an independent Syrian government set up by the Free French movement which the United States did not recognise; that the French, who in their declaration had reserved for themselves a privileged position in Syria after the war, would not thereby enjoy economic advantages detrimental to United States' trading interests; that Jewish hopes for a homeland in Palestine would not be thwarted by the creation of an independent Arab state in Syria.

The British tried hard to persuade the United States to accord recognition. They argued that the declaration of Syrian independence did not mean the end of the Mandate, but merely a modification of it; that the declaration fully recognised United States' rights under the 1924 treaty since the new Syrian government succeeded to all international obligations undertaken in its name; that the privileged position of France in Syria after the war would be of a military nature only, and that the Balfour Declaration applied to Palestine, not Syria. The British were also at pains to convince the Americans that their recognition of the new status in Syria would help the Allied war effort in that it would strengthen the hands of a friendly Syrian government against Axis sympathisers.
However, the Americans were not moved. They felt that they could not safeguard their treaty rights in the absence of a fresh treaty with Syria. Legal matters apart, the basic American objection was quite simply that they would not 'recognise anything as shadowy as the independence of Syria... in its present form'.\(^{16}\) It seemed the Wilsonian spirit had not yet expired in the State Department.

The United States was, however, willing to make a gesture to placate the Allies. On 29 November 1941, the American government issued a declaration expressing sympathy with the aspirations of the Syrian and Lebanese peoples for the attainment of full independence and stating that the Free French proclamation was a commendable step towards the goal. It was not until much later, in September 1944, that the United States government accorded full and unconditional recognition of Syrian and Lebanese independence.

NOTES

1. PO 371/24595, 12 November 1940, notes by Crosthwaite.
2. PO 371/27325, 2 June 1941.
3. Ibid., 6 June 1941.
4. Ibid., 3 June 1941.
5. PO 371/27323, 6 June 1941.
6. PO 371/27298, 3 July 1941.
7. PO 371/27291, 9 April 1941.
8. PO 371/27290, 7 May 1941.
9. PO 371/27330, 23 December 1940.
10. PO 371/27308, 6 August 1941.
11. PO 371/27311, 2 September 1941.
12. MAE, vol. 25, 16 September 1941.
13. Ibid., 26 September 1940.
14. PO 371/27290, 7 May 1941.
15. PO 371/29314, 28 October 1941.
16. PO 371/27315, October 1941.
The Presidency of Sheikh Taj al-Din al-Hasani

The first task of the newly formed government of Hasan al-Hakim was to bring into effect the independence of Syria. Al-Hakim, who was considered a man of integrity and who had never collaborated with the French Mandate, believed, on taking office, that the French might well have been sincere in their promise and reckoned that even if they had not been, the British, as guarantors, would make sure that that promise would be honoured. But he was soon to find that it required more than good intentions and trust of others to be able to implement the provisions contained in his ministerial declaration, especially those pertaining to administration and legislation. It was not until 12 January 1942 that General Catroux issued a decree proclaiming the unity of Syria and the reintegration of Jabal Druze and the Alawite region (though there had been a Druze minister and an Alawite minister since the formation of the government in September 1941).

In return for his decree, Catroux exacted from the president a letter in which the latter undertook not to 'proceed without [his] Excellency's approval with the choice of a Mohafez [governor] charged by the Syrian government to administer the Mohafazat'. In fact the president had already been conceding to the French the authority to appoint Syrian functionaries. Al-Hakim stated in his memoirs, Muzakkarat, that he disapproved of such excessive French interference and pressed the president for the transfer of all administrative and legislative powers to the Syrian government, but that Taj al-Din was both unwilling and unable to go beyond the limits set for him by the French. A clash between the president and the prime minister was unavoidable, and al-Hakim tendered his resignation on 18 April 1942. He was replaced as prime minister by Husni al-Barazi.

The Nationalists' political activities

Meanwhile, the Nationalist leaders who had been told by the Allied authorities to stop all political activities and refrain from undermining
the government, were keeping a low profile inside Syria. But their work continued elsewhere. In December 1941 Shukri al-Quwatli went on pilgrimage, and in late December Mardam Bey went to Egypt. Their purpose was to rally support in the Arab countries for the implementation of independence and the restitution of constitutional government at home. Al-Quwatli had passed through Iraq on his way to Mecca and had obtained the promise of the Iraqi government that it would do its best to press both the British and the French to hold elections in Syria. He also obtained the same assurances from Ibn Saud. In Egypt, Mardam Bey held talks with various Egyptian political leaders, including Nahas Pasha, who was then out of office, but whose return to power seemed imminent. Nahas Pasha promised to support the policy of the Nationalists in Syria. Both al-Quwatli and Mardam Bey met British officials in Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

On his return to Syria, Mardam Bey met General Catroux and the French counsellor in Damascus, Lépissier, and pressed again for a return to constitutionalism. He also met Hamilton, the British chargé d'affaires, and presented him with a note on the political situation in Syria from the date of the Allied invasion of Syria to February 1942 and made a strong plea for independence and a return to a constitutional regime. In his note, written in French, Mardam Bey recognised the positive steps taken by the French and the Allies in Syria, such as issuing the Proclamation of Independence, the firm stand regarding the territorial integrity of Syria, the reincorporation of Jabal Druze and the Alawite region 'in the national synthesis', the lifting of the economic blockade and the institution of the wheat plan. He added that all these measures were well received by the population. He then remarked:

None the less, in order that the French and Allied endeavours succeed fully, it is imperative that Syria should contribute generally and voluntarily within the actual framework of its independence. Only a durable regime can consolidate the foundations of the Syrian state. Independence must bestow on Syria a representative regime. The concept of independence which has not yet been translated, neither on the national political level, nor on the financial administrative level, 'ne présente plus comme prétexte à des développements oratoires'. In the light of the experience of these last months we can assert that the formulas of dictatorial character will simply lead to an impasse'.

As he was presenting his note to Hamilton, Mardam Bey warned that, although the Nationalists had so far been keeping a low profile, they were leaving their options open should the appointed government of the French fail to implement the country's independence fully.

The Nationalists knew that in order to achieve their goal they could
not operate solely on the Syrian national level. It was necessary to bring their policy into harmony with that of the Lebanese Nationalists, in particular the Maronites, who were well disposed towards the Nationalist cause. Mardam Bey, who had many personal friends amongst the Lebanese leadership, held a number of successful meetings with Beshara al-Khourí, and even with leaders known for their loyalty to France like Émile Eddé. The policies of the Nationalists of Syria and Lebanon had one common aim: the restoration of a democratic constitutional regime and the integration of Lebanon into the pan-Arab fold. Al-Khourí was in full agreement with these policies and action was to be taken along these lines. Upon the return of the Wafd party to power in Egypt, Mardam Bey sent a letter of congratulations to Nahas Pasha in which he said: 'The National Bloc... wishes to establish a truly democratic regime that will safeguard the unity and independence of its country, and will, in advance, welcome every effort made towards this goal.' Nahas Pasha's reply came in the form of an invitation to Mardam Bey to visit Egypt and hold unofficial talks with its political leaders.

Mardam Bey asked the Egyptian leader to inform the British and French authorities of his invitation and also suggested that Beshara al-Khourí be invited to join him. The Egyptians duly extended an invitation to al-Khourí and informed the Allies of their invitations through their consul in Syria and Lebanon.

Before leaving for Cairo in early June 1942, Mardam Bey called on General Catroux and Sir Edward Spears, informed them of his visit and found them receptive to the idea. Spears reported to the Foreign Office:

I received a call from Egyptian Consul General who informed me that he had received instructions from Nahas Pasha to invite Buchará al-Khourí... and also Jamil Mardam, to visit him in Cairo with a view to their receiving good advice from himself regarding their attitude towards the Allies and the War... I see no objection and possibly some advantage in Nahas Pasha's action, though it savours somewhat of interference in the affairs of other independent states.'

The official British comment on Spears's message showed that they were uneasy about Nahas Pasha's invitation: 'Rather surprised that Sir E. Spears has taken it so calmly... Nahas Pasha and General Nuri are too much concerned in putting the Syrian house in order.'

On 9 June Mardam Bey and Sheikh Beshara al-Khourí met Nahas Pasha and put forward the Nationalist proposals regarding the establishment of constitutional regimes in Syria and Lebanon that would bring into effect their countries' independence. On 13 June Nahas Pasha sent copies of their proposals to the British embassy in Cairo, which
The Presidency of Shetlab Taj al-Din al-Hasani

The Presidency of Shetlab Taj al-Din al-Hasani conveyed them to the Foreign Office with a note saying: 'Nahas was only communicating these proposals to us in order to keep us informed. His discussion was with the French, though he would appreciate our support... Nahas had some time ago taken up the matter with Catroux... Catroux had been forthcoming to Nahas's suggestion for more representative governments in Syria and Lebanon.'

The proposals regarding Syria called for the restoration of the constitutional position before 1939 by the reinstatement of the president then in office; the nomination of a new government by that president was to be followed by free elections. The Syrian government would then negotiate a provisional agreement with the Allies covering the war period, pending the conclusion of a definitive agreement after the war.

The proposals regarding Lebanon first made the point that the situation there was different from that in Syria because the nomination of the former president had been unconstitutional in the first place and parliament unrepresentative. The proposals began by stating that three-quarters of the country's population consisted of Sunnis and Maronites. Both denominations were agreed to support the Constitutional Bloc (the party founded by Beshara al-Khoury). Though it was the party of the majority, 'for more than ten years, this party, like the Wafd in Egypt had been arbitrarily kept out of office'. The proposals made it clear that nothing could be accomplished without the involvement of that party and that any solution to the political problem which it did not accept would be illegal and unconstitutional. It was therefore proposed that the president of Lebanon should tender his resignation to Catroux who would then call upon the leader of the majority party (the Constitutional Bloc) to head a provisional government; free elections would then follow, and the parliament so elected would choose the president.

In addition to these proposals, a specific proposal was made for the interests common to both countries. It called for the establishment of a Syro-Lebanese organ to take over responsibility for its management. It also dealt with the way disputes between the two partners might be settled. In case of disagreement, a commission of arbitration, composed of the delegate of Free France and the British minister plenipotentiary accredited to Syria and Lebanon, with the prime minister of Egypt as chairman, would adjudicate.

The British government which had, in the words of Eden, pledged to give 'full support to any scheme [of Arab unity] that commands general approval' did not in reality approve of a purely Arab scheme initiated solely by the Arabs themselves. Hence the seemingly inexplicable alarm with which the British reacted to the Mardam Bey-al Khouri visit to Egypt, as evidenced by the numerous reports in the Foreign Office files on the subject.

Surprisingly, the French reaction was much more sober until Spears
raised the matter with Catroux in a most dramatic way. In fact Catroux had had talks with Mardam Bey and al-Khouri on 14 June in Cairo. Catroux was therefore aware of the proposals put forward by the Nationalists, having discussed them fully with Mardam Bey personally. Catroux had even agreed to pursue the discussions regarding the 'modalities of application' of these proposals upon return to Syria. At his meetings with the Syrians and Nahas Pasha, Catroux did not at any time or in any way express disapproval of the Syro-Egyptian contacts.

The British were too perturbed by the Nationalists' progress to let matters rest; the Syrian government was reportedly very nervous about what appeared to be a breakthrough for its Nationalist opponents and, by British reckoning, any further successes by the Nationalists might well lead to the present government's disintegration. More important, a Nahas–Mardam Bey–al-Khouri alliance, if left unchecked, could have a destabilising effect on Britain's predominant position in the Arab world in the long term. In the immediate term, and given the Allied military reverses in North Africa, a nationalist resurgence and talk of an Arab federation were seen as inopportune if not downright damaging to British interests. Meanwhile, French complacency gave cause for concern. Therefore Catroux had to be jolted into action while Nahas Pasha and Mardam Bey had to be cut down to size.

Suddenly, the Syrian government informed the French that Najib al-Rayes, owner and editor of the Qabas newspaper, had visited the Syrian prime minister, Husni al-Barazi, on 23 June with a message from Mardam Bey to the effect that he had gone to Cairo at the invitation of Nahas Pasha and with the agreement of the British authorities to solve the Arab question; that all parties had agreed that the present government was to retire in favour of a government to be headed by himself; that elections would then be held in both Syria and Lebanon with Beshara al-Khouri as president-designate of Lebanon; that Mardam Bey would be seeing Catroux the following day, 24 June, to set the process in motion forthwith.

These allegations by the Syrian government were conveyed to Spears. For the British this was an opportunity not to be missed. Overnight, General Catroux came under heavy British pressure. He was asked to issue an official communiqué immediately denying these rumours categorically. He was further asked to bring Mardam Bey and Najib al-Rayes together for a confrontation in the presence of Spears. Catroux's reaction to the affair was relaxed in comparison. At a meeting with Spears on 30 June, he said that 'he would be surprised if Jamil Mardam had in fact commissioned Rayes to inform the Syrian foreign minister and [now] General Collet of the agreements reached and plans made in Cairo as Jamil was a very astute man. It was possible that the whole incident had been engineered by Mardam's enemies and possibly the
Syrian Government itself to discredit him.⁴ Catroux’s attitude was consistent with his earlier matter-of-fact report to de Gaulle where he stated simply that the visit to Egypt by the Syrian and Lebanese heads of opposition had aroused particular interest in ‘the interested circles’ in Damascus, and that during their stay in Egypt Mardam Bey and al-Khoury had exchanged views with Nahas Pasha, members of his government and other Egyptian politicians on the current situation in the Levant.⁵

Though unruffled, Catroux agreed to go along with the British, and on 3 July called Mardam Bey and al-Rayes for a meeting with himself, Collet and Spears. According to Spears’s account of the confrontation, written on the same day, Mardam Bey said that he had merely conveyed a personal message to the Syrian prime minister in quite general terms. The rest of the message contained speculation based on deduction, not fact. Spears wrote: ‘Catroux and I were convinced that Mardam had, in spite of his protestations, gone very far in his statements. The stories spread by Najib are so similar to Mardam’s statements to myself...that it is difficult to escape the conclusion that he had embarked on a dangerous intrigue.¹⁶

In the end Catroux agreed to issue a communiqué to ‘calm agitation’, and gave in to the British demand that Najib al-Rayes be interned and that Mardam Bey be invited to ‘retire to his house in Lebanon for a while’.⁷

The day the communiqué was issued on 4 July 1942, Mardam Bey wrote a letter of protest to Catroux saying that since the communiqué was aimed at him personally, it was his duty to make the following observations. He reminded Catroux of the circumstances surrounding his visit to Egypt:

During my farewell visit to your Excellency and to his Excellency the British Minister, far from noticing the slightest hesitation at the opportunity of my visiting Egypt, I received the assurance of the greatest goodwill for this project. With regard to my proposition, you have agreed to pursue in Egypt our conversations. The talks that took place in Cairo between your Excellency, his Excellency the Egyptian Prime Minister and myself, as well as between Nahas Pasha and myself could have left no doubt as to their final objective, this being the re-establishment of normal constitutional order...An accord of principle was reached and we decided to fix the modalities of application immediately after our return to Syria.

Mardam Bey called Catroux’s attention to the fact that only those who did not wish to see the normalisation of Franco-Syrian relations would profit by attaching ‘unbounded importance’ to rumours which were
anyway unfounded. At the end of his letter Mardam Bey wrote that, in order not to provoke any public discussions, he was willing not to publish his letter but would leave it to Catroux himself to repair the damage done by his communiqué. He added: ‘For my part, I find no better way of signalling my indignation than to return to the retreat that was imposed on me.’

The British authorities were still uneasy about Mardam Bey’s talks in Egypt and so asked their ambassador in Iraq to see Shukri al-Quwatli and seek his views on Mardam Bey’s visit to Egypt. The Ambassador reported back: ‘I saw Quwatli... as requested. He said he had not heard from Mardam recently and could not understand how Rayes made such a statement.’ What al-Quwatli did not tell the British was that he knew of Mardam Bey’s visit, had approved of the proposals he put forward to Nahas Pasha and Catroux and that he had himself taken up the same issue with the Iraqi government (which was still withholding recognition of the existing regime in Syria). The most short-sighted remark about Mardam Bey’s visit to Egypt came in a Foreign Office comment: ‘Jamil Mardam seems to have merely succeeded in making an ass of himself.’ The fact is that Mardam Bey’s proposals of June 1942 were implemented to the letter in July 1943 in both Syria and Lebanon. They formed the basis of Syrian-Lebanese relations and Franco-Syrian relations. By underestimating the intelligence and statesmanship of the Syrian leaders, which incidentally was not the case with the French, the British found themselves overtaken by events and had to face the fait accompli of dealing with the Nationalists and only the Nationalists.

Anglo-French relations in Syria

The internal situation in Syria during 1942 was on the whole uneventful, though civil disturbances were frequently threatening to break out on account of food shortages, soaring prices and, not least, public discontent with a puppet government. French policy in Syria was clear: there was no doubt in the minds of the French that the Nationalists enjoyed overwhelming support in the country but their return to power carried the risk of diminishing, or being seen as diminishing, French pre-eminence in Syria. As long as civil disturbances could be contained, the French could maintain their territorial command through their Syrian appointee and, more directly, by administrative decrees. Thus, in 1942 Free French policy regarding the granting of independence and the restoration of constitutional life in Syria and Lebanon may be described as a policy of procrastination. For the foreseeable future the two countries were to be ruled by dictate. The British, on the other
hand, had no consistent policy. They demanded a greater say in the
conduct of the internal administration and applied pressure on the
French to initiate the holding of elections in the two states. At the same
time they ruled out the Nationalists as possible candidates for
government. These two aspects of British policy were inherently
irreconcilable. As a result the British found themselves at loggerheads
with the French allies while unable to ensure internal stability. Anglo-
French friction steadily increased and came to dominate the political
scene in Syria throughout 1942 and beyond.

The major contributors to the muddle in British policy in Syria were
the British representatives on the spot. Their misreading and misreport-
ing of the Nationalists' standing with the Syrian population had
introduced grave contradictions in British policy objectives from the
start. To give one example, Hamilton wrote in March 1942 that the
Nationalists, though 'claiming' majority support and so able to bring
stability to the country, were in fact 'divided amongst themselves'.
Hamilton could not have been ignorant of the fact that the National
Bloc was a broadly based coalition of nationalist parties with diverse
social and economic doctrines where some personal disagreement over
specific issues was inevitable. Indeed there were personal disagree­
ments between the members of the Bloc, but they were firmly united
on one issue: the attainment of the independence of Syria. To
exaggerate these differences without recognising the powerful appeal
of the Nationalists' cry for independence to the mass of the people, was
at best an exercise in self-deception. Hamilton went even further and
wrote: 'Reliable observers maintain, that the desire of the Nationalists
for power... is directly connected with an agreement with our enemies
whereby holding office would coincide with an attack upon this
country.' Hamilton concluded that the Taj government should be
supported.9

In his turn Richard Casey, successor to Lyttelton as minister of state in
Cairo, reported to London that Hamilton's recommendations should be
accepted but added that 'there was a growing need for having in Syria,
as soon as circumstances permit, a government which commands real
support'. As regarded the French, Casey wrote: 'The main object of the
vast majority of the Syrians is to get rid of the French... Catroux should
be compelled to make Syrian independence a reality and thus justify
our support for Taj Ed Din.' On the question of an alleged plot between
the Nationalists and the Axis, Casey expressed reservations by saying:
'We should be glad to know the source of this information since no
(repeat no) reports confirming it have been received from any source.'10

The Foreign Office agreed that strong pressure on Catroux was
necessary to hand over more power to the Syrians in order to 'make the
façade of independence look as impressive as possible... Some
government must be established which has a measure of real popular support.’ But the Foreign Office did not address itself to the question of what sort of government it was to be, and evaded the issue by proposing that Catroux ‘should be asked for definite proposals’. In that astonishing piece of logic, the Foreign Office was calling for the curtailment of Catroux’s powers while expecting him personally to assist them to establish a popular government to which he was to relinquish his powers. To confound the issue further they precluded the Nationalists as an alternative government.

On the other hand, Spears, who seemed to have been driven by a strong urge to cut the French down to the size he had envisaged for them, did not let an opportunity to provoke them pass. Encounters between Spears and de Gaulle or Catroux almost invariably deteriorated into petty contests with one side trying to score points against the other so that no political issue of any weight could be tackled sensibly, let alone solved. Catroux and, by extension, de Gaulle, became more and more convinced that Spears wanted to push France out of Syria.

Towards the end of April, the British government endorsed Spears’s recommendations that Catroux be persuaded to announce the holding of elections to form interim governments and to curtail drastically the issuing of decrees forthwith. Catroux resisted British pressure as long as he could, but could not ignore the fact that the military command was in British hands and could be used in the last resort to undermine the territorial command (which was French). So in May 1942 three meetings were held in Cairo between Casey, Spears and Catroux.

On the question of holding elections in Syria, Catroux agreed, subject to de Gaulle’s concurrence, that he would make a ‘preliminary statement in general terms announcing a return to democratic institutions’ before the end of 1942. As to the question of decrees, Catroux explained that they were unavoidable until a Syro-Lebanese economic organisation was set up. Spears said that it would simplify matters if Catroux ‘were to inform him in advance of all important decrees which he proposed to issue’ and suggested, moreover, that the British and French intelligence and security services work together and submit ‘unified recommendations’. To Catroux this seemed like excessive British interference and he pointed out that ‘under the Lyttelton–de Gaulle Agreement, security had been recognised as a French responsibility’.

The main outcome of the meetings was a promise extracted from Catroux that elections would be announced in six weeks’ time. However, this was not to be. Allied reverses in North Africa at the time provided a good reason for an indefinite postponement. Thus French control over Syrian affairs remained unchecked.

But Spears’s crusade against the French on the one hand and the
Nationalists on the other continued. His antipathy towards the Bloc, which was patently the only political force in Syria capable of resisting French domination, played conveniently into the hands of his French adversaries. With the Nationalists neutralised, he had lost leverage against the French, and his drive for the holding of 'free' elections had lost credibility. In no way could the French interpret his actions as being motivated by a desire to see Syria free and tranquil. They saw them rather as a desire to see Syria free from French control and in British hands.

On several occasions the Foreign Office warned Spears of the dangers of antagonising the French, but such warnings went unheeded. At a meeting with Catroux which he reported to Casey on 1 July he said: 'Elections should be impartial.' In the next breath, he added, 'this did not mean that individuals to whom we objected on security grounds should be elected and that I was quite prepared to study with him a list of people who should be debarred on these grounds.' 19

The significance of this statement cannot be overemphasised. It provides the key to the mystery of Spears's seemingly irreconcilable policy of pressing for elections on the one hand and damning the Nationalists on the other. Given the near certainty of a Nationalist victory at the elections, the success of Spears's policy of curtailing French authority without running the risk of seeing a Nationalist government installed, hinged on his success in debarring candidates to whom he objected on security grounds. He and his subordinates in Syria had already branded the Nationalists as pro-Axis, albeit without a shred of evidence; now it was essential to establish the right of Britain's minister to be consulted on matters concerning the political direction in Syria in the name of security. This set him on a collision course with the French, which culminated in a serious clash between himself and Catroux. The outcome greatly diminished Spears's chances of participating in the Syrian electoral process. He was now hardly in a position to debar Syrian candidates from standing for elections at some future date.

When the Spears–Catroux clash was at its height, a Foreign Office memorandum warned: 'the military authorities in the Middle East could not afford to run the risk of a complete break in their relations with Catroux.' 14 By that time the Eighth Army had withdrawn to El Alamein; the memorandum went on: 'As the Levant States are within the zone of operations and may become a battle area, it is the duty of the department, therefore, to say plainly that we are running unnecessary risk by the situation which Sir E. Spears has created for himself.' Thus the question of Britain's participation in the election procedure in Syria was being overshadowed by military reverses in the Egyptian desert.

Spears began to lose not only his mandate from the Foreign Office to push on with his strategy, but also his personal standing as a diplomat.
In the same memorandum, Maurice Peterson, under-secretary of state at the Foreign Office, remarked:

Sir E. Spears has produced a situation of complete discord in Syria and the Lebanon. He is at loggerheads with the local governments, with the Free French and the Ninth Army. The Americans regard him as a disaster. I cannot even discover that he is on good terms with the Nationalist leaders outside the govt. On one of them – Jamil Mardam – he has made a slashing attack in connection with Jamil’s recent visit to Egypt.  

It was now a matter of urgent priority that Anglo-French differences be ironed out as far as possible. So a series of meetings between Casey and Catroux was held in early August in an effort to normalise the relationship. Catroux agreed with Casey that once the predominant political position of the French representative had been acknowledged, the right of the British to interest themselves in the affairs of Syria and Lebanon could be admitted. He pointed out that, in the event of disagreement, his own views would prevail.

On 8 August de Gaulle saw Casey in Cairo. When Casey brought up the question of elections in Syria, de Gaulle replied that this was the exclusive concern of mandatory France and the government of Syria. He said that the suggestion of holding elections was untenable at a time when the enemy was at the gates of Alexandria and that, anyway, his Committee had decided against elections in the current year. According to de Gaulle’s account in his memoirs, L’Unité ‘Casey did not insist’. A few days later de Gaulle had another meeting with Casey and, according to his memoirs, he later said to his colleagues: ‘Casey . . . did not once mention the elections. This affair is therefore liquidated for the current year. As long as the Germans are nearly in the Nile Delta and as long as Gandhi and Nehru are being arrested, we will not hold elections.’ His contention was that if the British gave themselves licence to arrest leaders like Gandhi and Nehru in India, they, the French, had the right to conduct the affairs of their own territories as they saw fit. He continued: ‘This point of view aroused . . . a storm in the English camp, which goes to prove once again that they have ulterior motives.’

Thus Spears had not only failed to dispel French suspicions that Britain had ulterior motives in Syria, but had in fact confirmed them. He had, however, strengthened the hands of the French in the area despite all his relentless efforts to the contrary. Of immediate concern to the British government was the damaging effect an Anglo-French rift might have on the morale of the French military. It was therefore not surprising that Spears came under fire from the Foreign Office. Peterson commented:

The Department are not quite sure exactly what case he (General Spears) is representing . . . there is no instance in which he may be said to have
helped the French except when his assistance could boost his own position, his solicitude for which is based either on personal egotism or on Empire-building proclivities which are some two hundred years out of date... Meanwhile an American source had commented that Spears's real objective is, through the instrumentality of his overelaborated Mission, to duplicate the French administrative system and squeeze them out much as Clive squeezed the French out of India'.

The attitude of the Foreign Office towards Spears contrasted sharply with that of Churchill who supported him. On 29 July, at the height of the Spears-Catroux dispute, de Gaulle wrote in his memoirs that when he complained of Spears's attitude, Churchill replied: 'Spears has many enemies. But he has one friend: the Prime Minister.' Was Churchill merely feigning solidarity with a British official before a man he considered overbearing, or was there another motive behind his support of Spears? De Gaulle, for one, was convinced that the British were trying to elbow France out of its 'possessions'.

In August de Gaulle left Egypt for a tour of Syria and Lebanon that was to last over a month. No sooner had he arrived than he sent a telegram to Churchill accusing the British of breaching the Lyttelton-de Gaulle Agreement and strongly implied that if the British did not stop interfering in the internal political affairs of the Levant states, the military cooperation of the Free French could not be assured. Churchill replied that he could not accept the contention that the British representatives had been interfering unduly in the affairs of the Levant, and that constant consultation between the British representatives and the French authorities was essential so that no policy was adopted that might jeopardise the Allies' military security. De Gaulle replied: 'The British and French authorities, which are properly military, whether in the battle for Libya and Egypt or for the defence of Syria and Lebanon, maintain very good relations.'

The message was clear. No longer would de Gaulle tolerate the stock British argument that the need for military security entitled the British to concern themselves with the political administration of Syria and Lebanon. He even approached the Americans through their consul in Beirut and threatened that if British agents in the Levant did not stop interfering in the internal administration of these states, he would request the British to leave his territory and, if they refused, would take measures to force them out.

As for the American government, it considered de Gaulle's policy regarding the future of Syria and Lebanon as incompatible with the Free French and British declarations at the time of the invasion. On the subject of Spears's alleged intransigence, it maintained that he had interfered in the internal affairs to an unnecessary and unjustified extent.
De Gaulle's wish to see Spears go remained ungratified, and this was bound to strengthen his resolve to keep Syria under French tutelage as long as possible. His attitude during his tour of Syria and Lebanon was thus largely dictated by the need to keep Britain at bay and his pronouncements, presumably made to a Syrian audience, were in a large measure aimed at the British. On 28 August de Gaulle made a speech in Damascus in which he stressed that 'the independence of Syria and Lebanon was an established fact...and was granted by France alone'. He added that the time was not ripe 'to have recourse to free popular consultations' when the whole world was at war. It was therefore necessary for defence and progress that Syria and Lebanon be closely allied to France on the model of the 1936 treaties. De Gaulle was in fact dismissing the role of Britain in Syria and Lebanon. The relationship between de Gaulle and the British deteriorated even further after the former's departure from Syria at the end of August 1942.

Following the Allied landings in North Africa in November 1942, the Americans, with the acquiescence of the British, decided to dispense with de Gaulle's leadership in the new theatre of war; de Gaulle was aggrieved and became less inclined to consider any proposal coming from the British on the future of Syria, where he had a relatively firm foothold.

Stagnation in political activities in Syria

While the situation in North Africa continued to overshadow all other events, the situation in Syria was bound to stagnate. Spears was still pressing for elections; General de Gaulle was barely listening and General Catroux was busy in Algiers. Jean Helleu was appointed as Catroux's deputy in the Levant during his absence, but Helleu was not given the same powers as Catroux and was therefore unable to take initiatives without formal instructions from the French National Committee. The absence of Catroux from Syria provided the French with a good excuse to maintain the status quo. The longer it lasted the better were the chances of consolidating the French position. The British were, on the other hand, too heavily engaged in the problems of the war to devote any special attention to the affairs of Syria. As long as there was no imminent danger of trouble breaking out in that country, they were content to let 'sleeping dogs lie'.

In Syria, Taj al-Din, by virtue of his close relationship with Collet, was informed that, in addition to Spears's continual pressure for holding elections, the French themselves might be obliged by force of circumstance to reform their policy. For his part, Spears was spreading the word around that the presidents of Syria and Lebanon would not
remain in power for long and that elections had become imminent in both countries. In October Taj al-Din embarked on a manoeuvre designed to pre-empt a possible decision by the Allies to hold elections in Syria. He threatened to call for elections himself and for them to be held under his presidential auspices. As a first step in this scheme he approached, with the help of Collet, members of the dissolved parliament of 1939 and managed to secure the support of 50 members who then signed a declaration legitimising his government and his presidency. Initially this declaration was circulated discreetly, but in November it was published: 'We, the members of Parliament, the legitimate representatives of the nation... declare that in the light of the efforts of H.E. President Taj al-Din al-Hasani in realising the national demands and consolidating independence, the choice of him assuming the Presidency was a useful and satisfactory one... therefore we elect and confirm him as President of the Syrian Republic.'

The signatories formed a majority of the surviving deputies, who now numbered 96 out of an original 104. Most of the 50 signatories were former representatives of minority groups and of desert tribes. The only members representing any of the major Syrian cities who signed the document were Faiz al-Khouri, the serving foreign minister and Munir al-Ajlani, the minister of information who was also Taj al-Din's son-in-law. (These last two deputies, along with others, were elected on the Nationalist ticket in 1936.) With this document in hand, the president had in effect assured his re-election to the presidency in the event of the French deciding to recall the old Chamber. Taj al-Din, a shrewd politician, played his trump card at the right moment when the British and French authorities had not yet agreed on the date of the elections, nor, for that matter, on the type of constitutional reforms to be introduced.

It was not until the end of November that the French National Committee seriously considered constitutional reforms in Syria. Catroux was asked to present a note to the Committee with proposals in this regard in the light of recent developments. He wrote:

President Taj al-Din... is a skilled politician. And he is perfectly capable, with the help of a few hundred thousand francs, which he will not fail to ask us for, of having a chamber elected that would keep him in office... He has always presented in our minds a temporary solution... He has been too ostensively the man of the Mandate... This is why we should dissociate ourselves from Taggedine... and take an orientation towards a national political form that would be indispensable in the future for our interests.18

It was then that Helleu sent a letter to the Foreign Office stating that elections in Syria and Lebanon would be announced by Catroux as
soon as he returned to Beirut sometime in December. But Catroux did not return to Syria in December as he was engaged in consultations over North Africa. Apart from its practical value, Catroux’s note was an incisive and objective analysis of the Syrian situation, reflecting statesmanship and vision.

Resumption of Nationalist activities in Syria

Meanwhile in Syria political activity began to reappear. In November the Nationalists, who had been forced into retirement, were back on the scene. November marked the commemoration of Ibrahim Hanano’s death. (Hanano, an Aleppine leader of the National Bloc, was one of the historic leaders of the 1925 Revolt whose death in 1935 provoked a two-month strike and induced the French into negotiating the treaty of 1936.) At the commemoration ceremony, which was held in Aleppo on 22 November 1942, President Hashem al-Atasi delivered a speech in which he disputed the claim that Syria was now independent and called for a return to a constitutional regime. For his part Saadallah al-Jabri launched an attack on the prevailing situation in Syria and affirmed that the independence of Syria had actually been proclaimed in 1920 as the Syrians had never accepted what had been imposed on them by the Mandate. He said:

We resisted and they were forced to recognise our independence in 1936, but reneged on their promises. This independence is neither a grant nor a gift offered by any one state as some foreigners declared last summer. This independence exists by the will of the nation... There are no different kinds or forms of independence; we do not accept diversions. There are only two courses: either they recognise our independence and its constitutional form or they say ‘We wish to govern this country during the war through military occupation’... We will not accept that occupation be called independence. They ask us about our attitude towards this war... They either denounce what we honour most: our nationalism and patriotism, or label us as Fascists or Nazis or communists or pro-Russian or pro-French or pro-British. We Arabs will never accept anything but being Arab. We are awaiting the end of the war to see whether this country will regain its freedom and unity.

The theme of al-Jabri’s speech was picked up by the prime minister, Husni al-Barazi, who unexpectedly gave an extemporaneous address at a musical recital organised by the press syndicate. He was replying to his minister of information, who had said that all Arab countries should recognise Syria’s independence:

What sort of an independence should these countries recognise?... In
the name of security they have stolen our authority. In the name of the
Common Interests, we have lost our own interests and our hope. They
pretend they have given us our independence, but I proclaim in the
words of King Faisal I: ‘Independence is taken and never given.’

Al-Barazi’s words angered both the French and the president of the
republic, who decided with Collet to get rid of him by any means.

A ministerial crisis developed in December and al-Barazi, who at first
resisted, was forced to resign after more than half the members of his
cabinet had resigned. Collet, much later, disclosed to Saadallah al-Jabri:
‘Although Husni al-Barazi was corrupt, I did not object to him, but he
also relied on the British and thought he could remain in power. When
I asked him to resign, he refused; I therefore recommended his arrest in
the Serail.’

The last days of Sheikh Taj

Husni al-Barazi was replaced by Jamil al-Ulshi, who formed a
government on 9 January 1943. Al-Ulshi was an independent politician
with no political following who in the past had been associated with
the Mandate. A week later the president was taken ill and on 17 January
he died of a heart attack. Thus the unconstitutional regime came to an
end, not through reforms promised by the Allies, but through the death
of one man.

Equally, French procrastinations came to an end. Al-Ulshi’s first act
following the death of the president was to issue a decree whereby his
cabinet assumed ‘until the resumption of parliamentary life’ the power
formerly vested in the President. By taking this step, the Syrian cabinet
had staved off the nomination of a successor to the presidency by the
French. A few days later al-Ulshi presented the cabinet with a draft
decree arrogating the presidential powers to himself, but the cabinet
refused to comply and sought instead to issue a decree (in conformity
with the constitution) providing for general elections to be held, at a
date and in a manner yet to be determined, for the purpose of electing
a new president. The Cabinet was forestalling an announcement by
the French to the same effect. But the Allies did not allow the decree to
be published. ‘It was made clear that no support would be forthcoming
for it on the British side, and General Collet succeeded in persuading
the Prime Minister to suspend it pending General Catroux’s return,’
wrote Spears to the Foreign Office. (15) At the same time Helleu issued
a communiqué on behalf of the French National Committee announcing
‘the near re-establishment of the constitutional regime’. This was well
received and created an intense activity in Syrian political circles.
Catroux returned to Syria at the end of January. He had been authorised by the French National Committee to take all the necessary steps, after consultation with the Syrian and Lebanese governments as well as with the leading political leaders, to re-establish the constitutional regime. But the French had not yet decided whether or when elections should be held. Both General de Gaulle and Catroux were still toying with the idea of recalling the dissolved parliament of 1939 in the hope that they could persuade it to revive the 1936 treaty which the French National Committee would then immediately ratify. A report (unsigned) by the French put forth the following proposals to the Committee:

The Franco-Syrian Treaty of 1936 as it was ratified by the nationalist majority ensured for France all possible guarantees for maintaining its position in the Levant. Yet that Treaty was stupidly rejected by the French Chambers at the instigation of Laval and L'État-Major... The disappearance of Sheikh Taj al-Din offers us an unexpected opportunity to repair honourably the initial error that Fighting France made in entrusting power to discredited men. It is to Jamil Mardam Bey that it will immediately have to appeal, as well as to the Secretary-General of the National Bloc, Shukri al-Quwatli. It would be more profitable to come to an understanding with them than to keep maintaining arbitrarily a system of authority, from which British propaganda draws its best arguments to destroy our prestige in the Arab world.19

In Syria the Bloc called for a congress to be held in Damascus under the presidency of Hashem al-Atasi. It met in the first week of February 1943. Representatives from all regions attended. They conferred for four days, but did not pass any resolution pending negotiations with Catroux. The majority of the Bloc members were in favour of a legal formula comprising two phases: the immediate reinvestment of Hashem al-Atasi with the presidency and the convening, for a limited period, of the dissolved parliament to debate al-Atasi’s resignation in 1939 and to give confidence to a provisional government which would preside over new elections. The Chamber would then dismiss itself.

The congress agreed that its leaders should negotiate with the French along these lines. During that same week, strikes and demonstrations took place in Damascus and other major cities in protest at the rise in the price of bread but mainly as a result of the prevailing political ferment and the weakness of the government. There was much unrest in Syria, especially in Aleppo where popular feelings were provoked by a British invitation to General Kanadly, the Turkish commander-in-chief of the troops in Alexandretta, to visit the city. According to a French report: ‘Several ceremonies of military character were organised in his
honour.' Catroux reported to the Committee that the visit provoked deep anxiety among both the Muslims and the minority population as many were interpreting it as 'a precursor of the cession of Aleppo and North Syria to the Turks'. This apprehension was confirmed by a meeting between Churchill and the Turkish president, Ismet Inönü, at Adana. As Spears put it in a report to the Foreign Office, the Syrians feared 'lest the price of Turkish cooperation should be the cession of Aleppo and the Jezireh to Turkey after the war'.

Rumours were also circulating that the British were plotting to install Emir Abdullah on a Syrian throne and that the vacancy in the presidency was an opportune moment for the Emir to make his move. On 2 February the French representative in Saudi Arabia informed the French National Committee that, in agreement with Iraq, London had formally guaranteed the integrity of the Saudi kingdom against any Hashemite claims over the Hejaz. In return Ibn Saud was asked to disinterest himself in Syria in the event of a monarchy being established there under Emir Abdullah. So the demonstrations that were taking place in major Syrian towns in February were directed not only against the French but also against the British. On 10 February 1943 Spears sent a report stating that 'two British soldiers who had been struck by stones retaliated by firing over the roof of a school'. Spears demanded that the Syrian prime minister make a public statement condemning the agitators in strong terms and that the ringleaders be immediately arrested. He also demanded that 'those most guilty will have to be deported'. Spears was in effect introducing an innovation in Syria. The French, unlike the British in Palestine, had not, during the period of the Mandate, used deportation as a means of punishment. Spears wanted to see a British practice adopted in a territory that was not under British jurisdiction. The deportation law in Palestine was an arbitrary law, which has survived to this day in the occupied West Bank and Gaza.

A statement was issued by the Allies 'denouncing as criminals' those who stirred up discontent and proclaiming that 'a certain number of agitators . . . will be arrested forthwith and deported'. Jamil al-Ulshi was asked to endorse this statement, but he categorically refused. According to Spears, Collet 'acting in collusion with the Syrian Prime Minister . . . has released almost all the persons who were arrested'. Spears added that this action was taken without the 'concurrence' of the British authorities and that it was 'dictated by considerations of personal prestige and by a desire to please the Nationalists, with whom there now seems to be little doubt that the French have come to an agreement over elections'. Spears protested to Helleu but Collet did not reverse his decision. The French authorities in Syria were at that particular time determined to impose their will. They were almost without exception Gaullists and the humiliation of their leader by the
British and Americans during the North African campaign was a decisive factor in their attitude towards the British in Syria.

The situation in Syria calmed down but did not return to normal. The strike ended but there were sporadic demonstrations. Catroux held wide-ranging consultations to bring about the necessary constitutional reforms whilst preserving France's privileged position.

**Catroux's negotiations with the Nationalists**

Catroux held meetings with all the political figures, concentrating his attention on the Nationalists, with whom he hoped to come to some arrangement whereby they would commit themselves to signing a treaty with France. In his negotiations with the Nationalists on the question of such a treaty, Catroux used the persuasive argument about the dangers of leaving Syria exposed to Zionist and Turkish ambitions.

He wrote to the French National Committee:

In Syria the Nationalists affirm their willingness to reach an entente with France and only France. All political circles are attentive to three facts: the interview of Adana [between Churchill and İnönü] which they fear might have secured advantages for the Turks. The interest which the Americans are showing for the development of Zionism and the project of settling Arab affairs through a confederation or any other formula of unity which presumably is supported by London and Washington'.

Catroux was employing a powerful argument in favour of a treaty with France by playing up both the Zionist and Turkish threats. But in 1943, especially during March when the Free French were divided in their loyalty between de Gaulle and General Giraud, it was neither opportune nor wise for the Nationalists to commit themselves in advance to a long-term settlement with one party or other whose future was still indeterminate. On 16 March Catroux reported to the French Committee that Hashem al-Atasi was ready to assume the presidency, form a government and recall the dissolved parliament; that he agreed to establish Franco-Syrian relations on the terms of the 1936 treaty, first version, but that he would limit its application for the duration of the war and that he would not commit himself for the future. What Catroux found alarming was that Hashem al-Atasi refused to 'declare by secret letter his acceptance of the terms of the Proclamation of Independence' of June 1941. The French view had since been that Catroux's proclamation 'subordinated' independence to the conclusion of a treaty, that independence was to follow such a treaty; but none of the Nationalists had accepted that view. However, despite that dif-
ference, Catroux continued to pursue his policy of bringing al-Atasi to power.22

Meanwhile, he issued decrees on 18 March 1943 providing for the restoration of the constitution in Lebanon and for the formation of a neutral government whose mission was to announce the elections. Catroux met al-Atasi again on 22 March. Al-Atasi told him that the Lebanese formula found favour in Syrian public opinion, in particular with a section of the Nationalists. It would therefore be desirable, al-Atasi advised, to establish a symmetry between the Syrian settlement and the Lebanese one.

Spears expressed his 'grave concern' over the negotiations between the French and the Nationalists and told Catroux that he knew 'for a fact that Syrian Nationalists had been considering the possibility of giving an undertaking' to conclude a treaty with the French but would plead later that they were prevented from carrying it out by public opinion. Spears seemed to be equally averse to the idea of a Franco-Syrian treaty despite British association with Catroux's Proclamation of Independence. He wrote to the Foreign Office: 'Nothing would of course debar us from advising the French against raising the treaty issue at a given moment on the ground that the public sentiment against it was such as to create an immediate security problem.'

Were the British hoping that if Syria was not bound by a treaty with France there might come a time when they would obtain for themselves a treaty designed to 'give them certain strategic rights in Syria and Lebanon? The answer seems to lie in the affirmative as shown by a document prepared by the War Cabinet Post Hostilities Planning Subcommittee on British Strategic Needs in the Levant States after the war. The 'four Levant States' referred to in the document comprise Greater Syria, Lebanon, Jerusalem and the Jewish State. The Palestine Committee for which the report by the chiefs of staff was prepared, had recommended to the War Cabinet that the area of Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Transjordan be 'partitioned'. The study was undertaken on the 'assumption that (a) the partition scheme is accepted and (b) that any security organisation which may be set up after the war will not initially be of a character to relieve the British and Commonwealth of responsibility for ensuring their strategic position in the Levant.'23

The government of Ata al-Ayoubi

On 24 March 1943 Catroux issued decrees setting up a provisional government in Syria under Ata al-Ayoubi as Chef d'État and head of government. The cabinet was formed of three ministers. Decrees were
also issued rescinding the measure which suspended the constitution in 1939 and restoring it with effect from the date of the election of a president of the republic by a representative Chamber. Electoral colleges were to be convened within three months and the head of state was given authority to make laws in the council of ministers and to conduct elections.

On 25 March Catroux addressed the Syrian people in a broadcast explaining the reasons for the measures he had taken. He said that the alternative measure of returning to a *status quo ante* was discarded because President Hashem al-Atasi 'moved by a scruple that honours his character' had judged it unacceptable. President al-Atasi, he continued, 'considered that it will be prejudicial to the will of the people, who must be given the freedom to express themselves'. In substance and in tone Catroux's address was confirmation of Free French intentions of pursuing a policy of understanding and cooperation with the Nationalists. In particular, the choice of Ata al-Ayoubi as head of state was a clear indication that Catroux had taken the measures in full agreement with the Nationalists. Spears admitted that the 'government has been well received', but added, 'despite its Nationalist bias'.

A few days before the formation of the government, civil disturbances broke out because of the shortage of bread. Ten people were killed and several injured. In a report from the French Delegation in Damascus, Collet declared: 'Shahbandarist elements wanted to show the authorities that the Nationalists were not the sole masters of the situation... But the nationalist leaders made laudable efforts to restore calm.'

A few days after Catroux's departure, Spears suggested to Helleu the setting up of a committee of advisers to supervise the forthcoming elections. Helleu replied that this proposition did not match up with the original idea of independence. Spears was yet again trying to create a role for himself in the elections. He had already suggested to Catroux that the candidates' lists be examined jointly on security grounds, but Catroux had rejected the idea.

During April the preparations for the elections got under way. The various political parties began campaigning although the date of the elections had not yet been decided on. The National Bloc had become somewhat factionalised, not on matters of principle but because of different personal allegiances. The factions reflected individual preferences and loyalties rather than ideological orientation. In Damascus this problem did not arise as the various Nationalist parties which had previously broken away from the Bloc now agreed to act in unison. But in Aleppo the differences were quite important and Shukri al-Quwatli was called upon to mediate, which he successfully did. Consequently, it was decided that the expression 'National Bloc' (al-Kutla al-Wataniah)
be dropped and the election fought in the name of the National List (al-Qaima al-Wataniah).

**Outside support for the Nationalists**

In April President Franklin Roosevelt sent a special representative, General Hurley, to the Arab countries with a message of goodwill from the United States of America. In Damascus General Hurley held talks with the Nationalist leaders about the situation in Syria and about their demands, which he promised to convey to his president. Shukri al-Quwatli gave a banquet in his honour, attended by the head of state and all the major political figures. According to a French report 'this reception was considered as the official inauguration of the collaboration of the nationalist leaders with the Allies'. The same report indicated that the opponents of the Nationalists were resentful of the relationship between the American government and the Nationalists as the nature of this relationship would strengthen the latter's electoral position.

During his meetings with the Nationalists, General Hurley was told that they would not accept anything less than total independence. They were prepared to come to an understanding with the French over their postwar relations, but were not prepared to grant France or any other power a privileged position in Syria. They also made it clear that their programme did not recognise the principle that the attainment of full independence was conditional upon their signing a treaty with France. They reiterated their support for the Allied cause and promised their help in the war.

The American general also visited the Supreme Qadi of Damascus, who represented the highest religious authority in the country, and delivered a personal message from President Roosevelt, expressing warm sentiments towards all Muslim and Arab peoples. The Supreme Qadi, Sheikh Abdel Aziz al-Khani, sent a letter to Roosevelt wishing him victory for the United Nations in their defence of liberty and justice and emphasising Syria's aspirations for independence. On 8 June the American president sent a reply to Sheikh al-Khani thanking him for the expression of his noble sentiments, which symbolised the strong ties binding his country with the Arab people, who he said were friends and allies. He looked forward to the early defeat of the Axis and to the rebuilding of a new world where peace and justice for all would prevail. He then made the significant point that the day was not far off when the Syrian people would enjoy their complete independence along with their Arab brethren; he concluded by exalting the Arab spiritual and intellectual heritage.

Since the United States had not yet formally recognised Syrian
independence as declared by France and Britain, President Roosevelt was addressing himself to a legitimate Muslim authority representing the majority of the Syrian people. By meeting and having talks with the Nationalists, the president's envoy was in effect recognising their importance in public life. The United States, which had so far refrained from involving itself openly in the affairs of Syria and Lebanon, was now making its presence felt as well as giving a clear indication of the policy direction it would take in due course. The Nationalists for their part were pleased that the president of the United States considered them to be a leading force in the country. Although they had misgivings about America's Zionist policy, they were preparing the ground for any help they might need from America in the event of a clash between Syria and France, but particularly between Syria and Britain.

The other important source of support which the Nationalists had to tap in preparation for taking power was the Arab world. They had good relations with the leaders of Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Already Nahas Pasha had taken the initiative of calling for some form of united Arab front. His call was well received in Syria. The leading Syrian Nationalists who had earlier in the century formed the vanguard of Arab nationalism expected to be called upon to play a prominent role in any discussions on Arab unity should these arise.

In early April Sabri Abu Alam Pasha, a member of Nahas Pasha's cabinet, announced in the Egyptian Senate that his government intended to have consultations with all interested parties in the Arab world to review the various Arab problems and take a common stand. At the same time Nuri al-Said sent a memorandum to Casey advocating the creation of a Greater Syria, comprising Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Transjordan. Special semi-autonomous states would be granted to the Christian and Jewish minorities. The form of government of that state would be decided by plebiscite. Nuri al-Said sent his special delegate, Jamil al-Madfai, a former prime minister of Iraq, to Nahas Pasha and to the Syrian Nationalists to discuss his proposals.

Al-Madfai went to Damascus in April and held several meetings with Shukri al-Quwatli, Jamil Mardam Bey and Saadallah al-Jabri, who declined to commit themselves to Nuri al-Said's project. They agreed in general terms on the desirability of Arab unity but made it clear that they would prefer to view al-Said's proposals in a wider Arab context.

At the same time Jamil Mardam Bey delivered a letter by hand to Nahas Pasha, through Naim Antaki, minister of foreign affairs in the Ata al-Ayoubi government who had gone to Cairo on a private visit. In his letter, dated 22 April 1943, Mardam Bey informed Nahas Pasha that the Nationalists had received Sabri Abu Alam Pasha's statement in the Senate with satisfaction and that they were confident that Nahas Pasha's efforts would be 'crowned with success'. He said that Naim Antaki
would convey to him verbally the opinion of the Nationalists on the various proposals for Arab unity. Nahas Pasha replied that he was most gratified to see 'unity of thought and desire between ourselves regarding the fulfilment of the objective which we both aspire to for your country and ours'.

The correspondence between Mardam Bey and Nahas Pasha clearly showed that the Syrian Nationalists' thinking was more in line with the Egyptian approach to Arab unity than with the Iraqi one. At that early stage, before even coming to power, the Nationalists were already engaged in laying down the foundations of Syria's Arab policy. That policy was later to materialise in what may be described as an Egyptian-Syrian-Saudi axis, which remained intact despite all the coups d'état that took place during the 1940s and 1950s. (It was later in the 1960s that the war in Yemen alienated Saudi Arabia from Egypt and much later, in 1978, that the Camp David Accords brought the break in relations between Syria and Egypt.) The Nationalists, in particular Mardam Bey, al-Jabri and al-Quwatli, believed firmly that the Arab defence against foreign intervention could be secured only through a strong Syrian–Egyptian alliance.

In June Nahas Pasha paid a visit to Palestine and held meetings with Palestinian leaders to examine the Palestine problem. Mardam Bey went to Jerusalem with a mandate from the Bloc to discuss with Nahas Pasha the future of Arab relations and to coordinate with the Palestinians the future Arab policy concerning the establishment of a 'Jewish National Home' in Palestine. Nahas Pasha and Mardam Bey agreed that when the Nationalists returned to power they would support proposals for holding talks in Egypt about Arab unity. They also agreed that the official Arab stand regarding the future of Palestine should be based on nothing less than the White Paper of 1939, although some Palestinians were objecting to it. Also at that meeting Mardam Bey told Nahas Pasha that the Nationalists were not prepared to negotiate a treaty with France, and that they stood by their demand for complete independence; they looked to Egypt for support to achieve it. He also asked Nahas Pasha to use his influence with the French to ensure fair representation of religious groups in the forthcoming elections in Lebanon so that Lebanon could be properly represented as an equal partner in the proposed Arab talks for Arab unity.

Elections in Syria

On 20 June 1943 the Syrian government published the electoral lists and elections were to take place three weeks later. Earlier Helleu had been confirmed as Catroux's successor and General Spears had been recalled
for consultations in London. There is no indication from British or French sources that the recall of Spears was connected with Catroux's departure, but it seemed a wise move on the part of the British government to keep Spears away from Syria and Lebanon at a critical time, when preparations for elections were under way.

In July General Catroux visited Syria and Lebanon on a farewell tour. On 10 July the first-stage elections took place in Syria and, two weeks later, the second-stage elections were held, giving a landslide victory to the Nationalist List. The French authorities kept their promise of non-interference and it was agreed by all sides, the British included, that the elections represented an impartial popular consultation. They passed off without serious incidents and hailed the return of the Nationalists to power after their forced absence for a few years. The country returned to a constitutional regime and the Nationalists were faced with the difficult task of leading Syria to total independence and of securing the evacuation of all the occupation forces after the war.

NOTES

1. FO 371/31473, 4 June 1942.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 24 June 1942.
4. Spears Papers, St Antony's College, Oxford. Conversations with Catroux, 30 June 1942.
7. FO 371/31473, 4 July 1942.
8. Ibid., Comment by (Lord) Hancock.
9. FO 371/31470, 8 March 1942.
10. Ibid.
11. FO 371/31470, 12 March 1942.
12. FO 371/31472, 13 May 1942.
13. FO 371/31473, 1 July 1942.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 11 August 1942, Comment by Maurice Peterson.
17. Ibid., 24 August 1942, Lord Halifax to Foreign Office.
18. MAE, vol. 40, 4 December 1942.
19. Ibid., 29 January 1943.
20. Ibid., 16 February 1943 and FO 371/35175, 26 February 1943.
21. MAE, vol. 41, 8 March 1943.
22. Ibid., 16 March 1943.
23. FO 371/35175, 8 March 1943.
25. Ibid., May 1943.

3. In St Cloud, France, 1918. Centre: Emir Faisal (later King of Iraq) with Anatole France on his right (in cap); front row from left: Mardam Bey, Awni Abdel Hadi; second from right is Rustum Haidar. Nuri al-Said is in the back behind Emir Faisal.

4. Mardam Bey, centre, addressing the Syrian parliament in 1933.
5. In the Arabian desert in 1934. King Abdel Aziz ibn Saud, right, with Mardam Bey, centre, and Tewfik al-Shishekli.


10. Shukri al-Quwatli delivering a speech immediately after being elected president on 17 August 1943; Mardam Bey is standing beside him.


13. President al-Quwatli, centre, with Mardam Bey talking to General Catroux in Damascus in December 1943. Colonel Oliva-Roget is on the left.

14. General Beynet, in uniform, with Mardam Bey, third from left, in Damascus 1944.
15. At the Presidential Palace in Damascus, 1944. From left: Shukri al-Quwatli, Mardam Bey, General Beynet, a Saudi emissary.

17. Mardam Bey in conversation with the US minister in Syria, George Wadsworth, in Damascus 1944.

18. At the Syrian foreign ministry in Damascus 1944, Mardam Bey, centre, is flanked by Minister Solod, left, and another Soviet diplomat, right. Haidar al-Rikabi is on the far left and Asem al-Naili on the far right.

20. Sir Edward Grigg, centre, on his visit to Damascus in 1944, is flanked by President al-Quwatli, left, and Mardam Bey, right. Saadallah al-Jabri is beside the president.

22. At a banquet in Abdin Palace, Cairo, 1945. King Farouk, fourth from left is flanked by Saadallah al-Jabri, left, and Mardam Bey, right. The Egyptian prime minister, Nokrashi Pasha, is next to al-Jabri; Omar Fathi is on the far left.
23. Members of the Arab delegations assembling in Cairo in January 1945 to
draft the Arab League Charter. Front row from left: Mazhar Areslan, Desouki
Abaza, Mardam Bey, Ahmad Maher Pasha, Emir Seif al-Islam Abdallah,
Hamdi Pachachi, Sheikh Youssef Yasin, Ahmad Hassanein Pasha, Tewfik Abu
al-Huda, Makram Ebeid. Nuri al-Said is behind Hassanein Pasha.

24. Mardam Bey signing the Arab League Charter in Cairo, March 1945.

26. The parliament building in Damascus after shelling by French forces in May 1945.
27. In Jabal Druze, July 1945. Mardam Bey, centre, waving to mounted Druze warriors after the French military assault.

29. Sheikh Hassan al-Banna (with beard), leader of the Muslem Brothers, receiving Mardam Bey, centre, in Cairo, October 1945.

30. As a meeting of the Arab League Council in Cairo, 1948. Seated from left: Muhammad al-Ayesh, Haj Amin al-Husseini (Grand Mufti of Jerusalem), Emir Abdel Karim, Riad al-Solh, Mardam Bey, Abdel Rahman Azeem Pasha. Standing on the left pointing a finger is Habib Bourguiba (later President of Tunisia).
31. In Deraa, Syria, 1948. From left: Emir Abdel-Ilah (Regent of Iraq), Mardam Bey, Muhammad al-Ayesh.

32. Mardam Bey, right, at a dinner hosted by General Muhammad Naguib, (President of the Egyptian Revolutionary Command Council), left, in Cairo, 1953.

33. In Cairo, 1953, second row from top, left to right: Abdel Latif Baghdadi, Anwar al-Sadat (later President of Egypt), Adel Taher; middle row from left: General Muhammad Naguib, Sheikh Jaber al-Sabah, Mardam Bey; front row from left: Ali Maher Pasha, Sheikh Ibrahim al-Fadl.
34. Emir Faisal (later King of Saudi Arabia), right, with Mardam Bey in Cairo, 1955.

35. Emir Fahd (now King of Saudi Arabia), left, with Mardam Bey, centre, and Mahmoud Riad in Damascus, 1955.
CHAPTER V

The Nationalists Return to Power

Formation of a Nationalist government

The first task facing the Nationalists after the election was to lay the foundations for their forthcoming rule. The first step was to choose the president and form a government. Initially most of the Nationalists were inclined to reinstate Hashem al-Atasi, but after the elections he was reluctant to assume the presidency as Shukri al-Quwatli had led the election campaign - bringing all the Nationalists into line - and had set his sights on the presidency. Al-Quwatli's claim was not disputed by the other leaders, and even Hashem al-Atasi, who was not on especially good terms with him, gave his consent to avoid any dissension in the Nationalist ranks. On 17 August 1943 the newly elected parliament convened and elected Shukri al-Quwatli president of the republic and Fares al-Khouri president of the assembly.

Immediately after becoming president, al-Quwatli delivered a speech announcing, in general terms, the future policy of the Nationalists. This was the attainment of complete independence and sovereignty, the maintenance of close cooperation with the rest of the Arab world, and the development of Syria's international relations in accordance with the principles of the Atlantic Charter. In his speech, al-Quwatli sent a special message of goodwill to the French people who, he said, were fighting for their freedom. He also saluted the 'venerable' President Hashem al-Atasi, who had represented the honour of the country during his presidency and who had fought to defend its rights.

This done, the leaders held a meeting for the formation of the government. The choice of Saadallah al-Jabri as prime minister was unopposed, particularly in view of (veiled) Turkish threats to northern Syria, where al-Jabri was the leading political figure in its capital, Aleppo. Jamil Mardam Bey chose foreign affairs on the understanding that he would have a free hand in shaping and implementing Syria's foreign policy. He and his colleagues were acutely aware that in the succeeding few months, and perhaps years, the highest priority in political activity would necessarily be given to foreign affairs, including
relations with France, the establishment of relations with the Great Powers and with the Arab world. Mardam Bey's request was accepted unreservedly by his colleagues as they knew that he was the best qualified leader to lead negotiations with France.

On 22 August the formation of the government was announced as follows: prime minister, Saadallah al-Jabri; deputy prime minister and minister of foreign affairs, Jamil Mardam Bey; minister of the interior, Lutfi al-Haffar; education and defence, Nassouh al-Boukhari; finance, Khaled al-Azm; public works, Mazhar Areslan; Justice Abd al-Rahman al-Kayali; commerce, Tawfiq Shamiya. The composition of the government was criticised by Spears on the grounds that it did not include representatives from the Druze and the Alawites. He voiced his criticism to the president, who replied that, in making his choice, 'he was determined to put together a team composed of people for their individual merit'. In fact, when the Nationalists took power, they resolved to treat all Syrians as equals and to avoid drawing attention to any suggestion of separatism epitomised by 'minority groups' with special rights and prerogatives. The idea was to do away with factionalism at the outset in order to prevent minority problems from arising in the future. The Nationalists knew full well that any such problems, if allowed to develop, might be seized upon and fully exploited by foreign powers wishing to interfere in Syrian affairs.

The choice of Khaled al-Azm as member of the cabinet was controversial since many Nationalists did not trust him and many felt that he had never adopted a nationalist policy, but had stepped into government as a French appointee. But his appointment was a politically astute move to bring him into the fold rather than leave him isolated and prone to exploitation by the French whenever they decided to find an alternative to a Nationalist government.

The new government was well received not only in Syria but also in the rest of the Arab world and by the French. Iraq, which had withheld recognition for so long, immediately accorded recognition to both the independence of Syria and the Syrian government. It also elevated its consulate to a legation. All the Arab heads of state and government sent congratulations to the newly elected president and government. But Spears was not pleased and reported that serious rifts already existed between the members of the government which the 'unstable character' of Saadallah al-Jabri was unlikely to heal and that such rifts would 'weaken the parliamentary position of the government from the outset'. Spears was already criticising the government three days after its formation, perhaps to justify his anti-Nationalist attitude. According to a report by the French Delegate in Damascus, the British tried to interfere in the Syrian elections: 'Since the electoral campaign began the agents of the Spears Mission have informed on our conversations with
nationalist leaders. They seem to have wanted to gain the friendship of the Shahbandarist opposition in Damascus. They have taken part in several meetings of the Popular Front [the Party of al-Shahbandar's supporters]. This flirtation was, however, of short duration, as it did not take long for our Allies to realise that they were betting on the wrong horse.2

The appointment of Jamil Mardam Bey as foreign minister was interpreted by many as a precursor of the return of the 1936 treaty, although he had made no reference to the treaty, either in his conversations with the French or during the electoral campaign. Before the elections the Nationalists knew that the French wanted a treaty; but they had always dodged the issue by taking the line that on juridical grounds the French National Committee was not a government whose undertakings would be binding on future French governments. The French, not wishing to start their relations with a Nationalist government by provoking a crisis, did not raise the subject of a treaty. They were waiting for the Syrians to make the first move, when the question of administrative powers would be raised. The Syrians were also playing for time before embarking on major negotiations, particularly as they had no intention of concluding a treaty with any foreign power.

The first official utterance from the Syrian side came at a banquet which Spears had given in honour of the president and members of his government. After welcoming his guests in the most flattering terms, Spears said that Britain considered Syria and the Middle East to be of vital importance to its routes to the empire. He stressed the importance of Syria to Britain in both war and peace. British policy, he continued, was opposed to the use of force and recognised the right of small and big nations alike to independence. He added that Britain wished to see Syria fulfil its 'aspirations', and to see the routes which were Britain's lifeline protected. Spears concluded by thanking the president for his reference to the Atlantic Charter in his address to parliament and expressed his sympathy with Syrian 'aspirations'.

The president asked Mardam Bey to reply to Spears. For Mardam Bey, Spears's speech had omitted two important words: independence and sovereignty; he had spoken only of Syrian 'aspirations'. In his personal notes Mardam Bey made a point of this: 'It was observed that the Minister Plenipotentiary did not mention independence but only used the expression "Syrian aspirations".' With this omission in mind, Mardam Bey got up to respond to Spears and said that although Syria recognised its obligations towards the United Nations, particularly to those like Britain and the United States of America, which had helped it to achieve independence, it would not be able to participate in the international arena without first achieving sovereignty and total
independence. In mentioning the United States alongside Britain, Mardam Bey was signalling to the British that Syria would seek support from the United States if the British or the French applied any kind of pressure on his government for their own ends.

Franco-Syrian relations

Relations between the new government and the French were notably cordial; as a gesture of goodwill the French recalled General Collet who had been closely associated with the previous regime. Before he left, Collet paid a farewell visit on 15 September to the prime minister and expressed satisfaction at seeing him back in office. Saadallah al-Jabri complimented Collet personally by saying that he admired his courage and honesty. He said that the Syrian government sympathised with France's aspiration to be free from Nazi rule. Al-Jabri then tackled him on the question of the political detainees whom the Syrians wished to free, adding that he was at a loss to discover who was really responsible for their arrest. At this point, Collet railed against the British and mentioned specific incidents like Aref Nakadi's arrest, how he had managed to release him and how the British rearrested him. He also mentioned the case of Sabri al-Asali and his companions who had been detained by the British despite his decision to release them. Collet added that when General de Gaulle and Massigli (who was then the French Committee's spokesman for foreign affairs) were in London, both Churchill and Eden had assured them that Britain had no wish to interfere in Syria, but that in fact this was not the case because the British envoys in Syria were actively planning to bring Syria under British influence. Collet also mentioned British interference in Jabal Druze, how they used the wife of Hasan al-Atrash, the famous singer and actress, best known by the name of Asmahan; he said that they gave her money and sent her to the Jabal before the invasion to enlist the support of the Druze. He also recounted the occasion when the British had paid cash to several Druze men (in his presence) to advance their interests. Later, he said, he showed them the failure of their policy by producing a statement signed by all those they had paid affirming their attachment to Syrian unity. (This last reference to the Druze was made in the context of the British attempt to enlist Druze support for Emir Abdullah's claim to the Syrian throne.) At the end of the meeting al-Jabri repeated his demand for the release of the detainees and Collet promised to do all he could.

Mardam Bey had raised the same question with Spears when he met him earlier, on 6 September; he demanded that urgent action be taken
by the British authorities in this regard. He told Spears that when the French authorities were approached on the subject of the detainees, they claimed that the British were opposed to their release. After much pressure from the Syrian government, the political detainees were finally released at the end of September. During his meeting with Spears, Mardam Bey asked him to define the British attitude towards a Syrian take-over of administrative powers. Spears assured him that the British fully supported such a move and were actually working towards the election of a nationalist government in Lebanon which would countenance such an initiative by Syria. Mardam Bey then told Spears that his government followed the 'well-known policy of not entering into any agreement or treaty but of seeking to obtain all the administrative powers without antagonising the French'. He inquired what the British reaction would be to such an eventuality. Spears 'cautiously replied that both the French and the British were agreed on granting Syria "real" independence'.

On 15 September Mardam Bey met the American political agent, George Wadsworth, who had been instructed by his government to find out what the Syrian government's intentions were regarding their future relations with France. Wadsworth asked Mardam Bey about the attitude of the Syrians towards concluding an agreement or a treaty with France. Mardam Bey replied that Wadsworth had already expressed apprehension on this issue during their previous talks before the elections and that he (Mardam Bey) had assured him that his concern was unfounded as the Syrian government did not consider the French National Committee legally qualified to sign any such agreement. Wadsworth expressed his 'pleasure' at hearing this and asked Mardam Bey about his government's economic policy, and specifically about the method it would adopt to recover the Common Interests and the administrative powers currently exercised by the French. Mardam Bey replied that his government would demand all these powers immediately after the formation of a constitutional government in Lebanon and added that Syria was determined to be generous with Lebanon if the latter followed a policy aimed at attaining total independence. Mardam Bey then expressed his hope that the Allies, in particular Britain and the United States, would support Syria's demands.

Wadsworth then brought up the subject of the Syrian monetary system and wondered whether Syria would seek the help of American and British advisers. Mardam Bey replied that once the Syrian government had taken over administrative powers, this suggestion would be considered. Wadsworth's soundings were the first indication of American interest in using national economies in the conduct of United States foreign policy. At the end of the meeting Mardam Bey asked Wadsworth to help to raise the level of diplomatic representation
between Syria and the United States since the rank of political agent did not signal full recognition of Syrian independence.

The first Syrian approach to the French was made on 16 September during General Collet's farewell visit to Mardam Bey. The meeting took place at Mardam Bey's house and was meant to be an informal exchange of views which Collet would transmit to General de Gaulle and the French National Committee on his return to Algiers. Mardam Bey asked Collet to convey to the French Committee the Syrian government's real desire to establish the best of relations with France while insisting on independence and sovereignty. He added that the Nationalists did not agree with Collet over the Committee's policy in Syria and felt that the policy was, in fact, causing more harm to France than to Syria. He went on to say that certain French officials accused the Nationalists of being their enemies because they had not yet shown any readiness to conclude a treaty with France. At this point Mardam Bey clarified Syria's position on the question of a treaty:

The French National Committee does not have the right to conclude any agreements, be it the revival of the 1936 Treaty or the conclusion of a new treaty, as the Committee at present is in a state of 'juridical incapacity' (incapacité juridique); this is because it cannot be said that the Committee is the legitimate heir of the French government. At the same time the Syrian government is unable to sign a treaty with the French Committee as its two Allies, Britain and the United States, signatories to the Atlantic Charter, have decided that no treaty or agreement or even negotiations should be entered into before the projected Peace Conference.

Collet was impressed by Mardam Bey's clarifications saying that this was the first time that such an explanation was given to him and that he would convey it to General de Gaulle. Collet then referred to British meddling in Syria and to the rumours spread by British agents that France no longer enjoyed a privileged position in Syria and Lebanon despite the assurances to the contrary given to Massigli by Eden. Collet said that such rumours were bound to create difficulties between the French and the Syrians, a situation which the British would exploit. On this issue Mardam Bey assured him that his government would never be influenced by rumours, whatever their source, as it was only concerned with the independence of Syria. As for France's privileged position, Mardam Bey asked Collet what its precise meaning was, adding that if it meant that France should be represented by an ambassador in order to preserve French seniority in protocol, while other states were represented by ministers, then the matter would be open for discussion; however, if 'privileged' meant the infringement of Syrian sovereignty
and independence in any form or for any reason, then such a proposition would be totally unacceptable.

**Syro-Lebanese consultations**

In September 1943 the Lebanese elections took place, and Sheikh Beshara al-Khouri was elected president by the new Chamber. Riad al-Solh, an ardent Arab nationalist, became prime minister. The new regime in Lebanon was warmly welcomed by the Syrian government which saw in it the advent of a new era of close cooperation and understanding between Syria and Lebanon. The Syrian Nationalists had in 1942 secured Beshara al-Khouri’s promised support for their regional and Arab policy if he was to come to power. Shortly after his investiture on 4 October, Saadallah Al-Jabri and Mardam Bey held a meeting with him and Riad al-Solh in Aley, a summer resort in Lebanon, to discuss their respective governments’ attitudes towards the French and to coordinate their policies. The Lebanese president opened the meeting by expressing his personal desire and that of his government for close cooperation with Syria, and added that he considered the Mandate as terminated and that Syria and Lebanon were wholly independent and should exercise all powers. Saadallah al-Jabri asked Mardam Bey to explain the political position in all its aspects to the Lebanese colleagues. Mardam Bey said that his government was determined to take over all the powers which the French administration was exercising, but had been waiting for a constitutional regime in Lebanon to be established before starting to make demands. Since the Lebanese elections such a legitimate regime had been established, so that the Syrian government could now put forward its demands jointly with the Lebanese government. Accordingly, Mardam Bey suggested the creation of a joint committee formed of the prime ministers and foreign ministers of both countries; at the same time he advised caution against haste or any action that might precipitate a crisis, such as issuing warnings or submitting memoranda to the French before knowing the outcome of the negotiations which the Syrian government had started with Helleu.

The issue of a treaty with France was raised and discussed at length; Mardam Bey expressed his point of view regarding the ‘juridical incapacity’ of the French National Committee and added that he believed that the French had for the time being accepted his view. At this point President al-Khouri said that if a treaty had to be concluded, it would have to be inspired by the exchange of letters attached to the Franco-Syrian and Franco-Lebanese treaties of 1936. Mardam Bey replied that it would be best not to be constrained by any agreements and to try to find a diplomatic way to take over powers. These powers
were divided into two categories: the Common Interests, which concerned the two countries jointly, and the administrative powers pertaining to each country separately, such as the supervision of companies enjoying special concessions in one country and not in the other. Mardam Bey then mentioned the attempts by the British to curb French influence by proposing the creation of an authority consisting of the French, the British, the Americans, the Syrians and the Lebanese to replace the existing French authority to run the economic affairs of Syria and Lebanon. He then disclosed that he had held discussions with the British and French representatives and informed them that the Syrian government would under no circumstances accept such an authority dominating its economy, and that his government would only use foreign technical advice if no Syrian nationals were available. Mardam Bey added that he believed that the Lebanese government would endorse his view. Both Sheikh Beshara and Riad al-Solh assured the Syrians that it did. Al-Jabri then stated that the Syrian president and all the members of his government supported an independent Lebanese entity and accepted Lebanon's rightful regime and its present frontiers, provided that its independence was total and real in the sense that no foreign power could use Lebanon as a base to undermine the interests of Syria.

Franco-Syrian negotiations

The French were kept in suspense by the Syrian government over their future relationship, but they were certain that at some point, sooner rather than later, the Nationalists would demand the take-over of the administration of the Common Interests. The correspondence between Helleu and the French Committee at the end of September 1943 indicates that they were preparing themselves for dealing with the expected Syrian demands. Helleu wrote that the question of the Common Interests would soon be raised and that it would be dangerous for the French to yield on this issue before the conclusion of a treaty. On this point Catroux agreed with Helleu: 'It is important for us to preserve for the future certain important pawns, so we can enter the negotiations from an advantageous position.' Accordingly Massigli wrote to Helleu: 'The retrocession of the Common Interests can only be envisaged within the framework of the statute of independence, which will be fixed by the treaties to be concluded with Syria and Lebanon.' But Massigli added that although this was 'une position de principe', it was open to modification if circumstances required a change of French policy in the Levant.3

On 12 October the Syrian and Lebanese prime ministers and ministers
of foreign affairs met in Shtaura, Lebanon, to discuss the Common Interests and their respective approach to the French. The Syrian government had prepared a draft memorandum which it presented to its Lebanese counterpart for approval. It concerned the immediate transfer of the administrative and other powers from the French to the national governments. In his diary for the 12 October, Mardam Bey wrote:

We read the draft of the memorandum and of the projected agreement which we approved in principle, but we decided to defer the final decision until the day after tomorrow as the French ambassador [délegué] and his aides are to dine this evening with the Lebanese President. We asked Riad [al-Solh] and Takla [the Foreign Minister] to discuss with him the question of taking over the Common Interests and all the administrative powers that complete the aspects of sovereignty and to inform us of their talks tomorrow morning as the ambassador will be lunching at my house and we must know clearly their position. Riad wanted us to initiate the talks because Chataigneau, the general secretary of the French delegation, had visited them and when they had voiced their wish to hold discussions with him, he had told them that he was lunching with me, and that then the talks can be start.

On 13 October Mardam Bey wrote:

Saadallah telephoned me and said he would like to come and see me before the French ambassador arrives to lunch. He came over and told me that Riad al-Solh had sent Taqi al-Din al-Solh [a cousin of Riad's who in the 1970s was Prime Minister of Lebanon] to inform him of the conversation that had taken place at dinner last night between Sheikh Beshara, Riad al-Solh and Selim Takla, on the one hand, and the French on the other. A summary of these talks is as follows:

The Lebanese government asked for the transfer of all powers held by the French High Commission; the French replied that the Mandate still existed if not de facto at least de jure and that such a demand could only be met through a negotiated treaty between the two parties concerned. The Lebanese answer was frank and clear: it was not possible now to sign a treaty because the French Committee did not have legal or constitutional status; moreover that Lebanon did not recognise the Mandate and demanded to exercise all its rights. Finally, the French ambassador said that he was travelling shortly to Algiers and would submit the views of the Lebanese government to the French authorities there.

Mardam Bey and al-Jabri discussed the question before the arrival of Helleu, Chataigneau and Colonel Oliva-Roget, who was the French Delegate in Damascus. After the guests had come and gone, Mardam Bey recounted the conversation in his diary:

After lunch Saadallah opened the conversation by asking Chataigneau,
who had just returned from Algiers, what they [the French Committee] thought of our affairs; he was given an obscure answer. Then Helleu referred to the dinner of the Lebanese President and the talks they had then, adding that the Lebanese side was not pleased with the result. Helleu's version of the discussion was identical with that of Riad al-Solh. Saadallah then said the Minister of Foreign Affairs would explain our point of view. I began by stating that the friendly relations that existed between us and the French required that all outstanding matters be resolved.

Then I referred to the historical background and to the numerous attempts that we had made to reach a settlement and mentioned that the Mandate was at no time accepted by the country; that even France herself had never respected or implemented the terms of that document; how the Constituent Assembly of 1928 was unable to complete its work, and that when we signed the Treaty of 1936 we hoped that this would be the end of the road; how I personally bore a heavy responsibility to make the Treaty succeed, travelling several times to France; that unfortunately during my last trip in November 1938 and after the French Foreign Minister, Bonnet, had signed the agreement, the French government went back on it; then came the abolition of the Treaty and the return of the Mandate, until June 1941 when the Free French and the British entered Syria and delivered their proclamation of independence for Syria.

I then referred to de Gaulle's letter to me of 6 June 1941 and to the statement broadcast by Catroux on 8 June and to the speech made by de Gaulle at the Syrian University and also to my meeting with him on 25 June when he proclaimed in front of all the former Syrian presidents the end of the Mandate and the independence of Syria. Then I said that Syria had never ceased to demand her rights and had never failed to respect its agreements. Syria signed a Treaty in Paris on 9 September 1936 and her Parliament ratified it on 21 December 1936 and her government put it immediately into effect, but the French side did not carry out its obligations, and the days passed and with them passed the French government and Parliament; these were replaced by a Committee which is heir to neither and which has not yet been recognised as a legitimate government having the right to sign contractual agreements. However, as independence was proclaimed and Syria had become a sovereign state, it should exercise all rights and powers which are still in the hands of others. That is why the Syrian government wished to take over those powers. Besides, the fragmentation of power and the resulting loss of responsibility, would render the task of governing difficult, if not impossible. It was therefore beneficial to place all these powers in the hands of the Syrian and Lebanese governments as we feared that these might leak into a third party's hands and we were anxious that our country should enjoy independence and bear its share of responsibility like Egypt and Iraq.

The French ambassador then said that Egypt and Iraq had signed a treaty; I replied that Egypt had signed a treaty in 1936 but that the British reservations had been issued on 18 February 1922 and that during the
whole period Egypt had enjoyed all the administrative powers and had exercised all its rights. When Syria receives all this, it would then qualify to conclude agreements. Helleu said: ‘Did you not sign a treaty in 1936 on these same conditions?’ to which Saadallah replied that we had been forced to sign that treaty because Syria was in a state of turmoil and chaos and, moreover, had Leon Blum not come to power it would not have been signed. He added: ‘I want to speak realistically, what harm would befall you if we took over much of the administration that is in your hands such as customs, internal security, press censorship and concessionary companies. Since we are a nationalist government we have no alternative but to demand the transfer of all these responsibilities.’

At this point Colonel Oliva-Roget asked Saadallah: ‘As Prime Minister and a man known for his frankness, are you prepared to enter into agreement with France?’ This was met with silence and Helleu then said that he was going to Algiers soon to have talks with the Committee and that he would put before it our views. He then said that he was afraid that the administrative powers might pass on to a third party, meaning the British and the Americans. Our answer was that developments pointed in that direction and fearing this, we wished to exercise all our rights and defend them and never permit their surrender. But the French, by withholding these rights from their rightful owners, are letting others assume the appearance of solicitors of Syrian rights and independence. I then told the ambassador: ‘Since you are going away it would be useful for the Syrian government to submit to you a memorandum on the issues to show to the French authorities.’

Mardam Bey commented that these talks demonstrated that the French were not prepared to hand over what they held and that the treaty they had in mind was not aimed at the transfer of powers but at linking the future of Syria to that of France.

The French mentality has not changed despite the misfortunes that befell them. They still believe that Syria and Lebanon are their undisputed property, that the nationals of these countries are their subjects and that the idea of independence and sovereignty was merely a joke. When France returns to its former power it will renege on its promises as in the past.

Mardam Bey’s conclusions were exactly right when seen in the light of Helleu’s report to the French Committee shortly after his meetings with the Syrian and Lebanese governments: ‘I naturally told my Syrian and Lebanese interlocutors that a normalisation of relations between France and their countries can only be achieved through a treaty. They gave evasive answers. It seems that both governments are satisfied for the moment and, to save face, they will ask for certain minor concessions.’

On 20 October Mardam Bey invited Helleu to an informal dinner and presented him with the memorandum which the Syrian government
had prepared for the French National Committee. In his diary Mardam Bey wrote: ‘I gave Helleu the memorandum after I received a telephone call from the Lebanese President and Riad [al-Solh] informing me of their approval of our agreement over the customs and our memorandum to the French. I signed the document and sent a copy to the President at midnight.’

The memorandum, dated 20 October 1943, referred to the Allies’ Proclamation of Independence and to the recognition of Syria’s independence by the ‘Allied Powers and friendly countries as well as by the Arab states’. It pointed out that all these states had appointed diplomatic representatives, who, on presenting their letters of credence, ‘have underlined their complete satisfaction at seeing in this country the inauguration of a regime of sovereignty’. In view of this, the memorandum expressed the hope that the ‘Délégation Générale and the services that are attached to it will be transformed in a way compatible with independence... that Délégation should become a diplomatic mission’. The memorandum added that since Syria was governed by a democratically elected government, it must exercise ‘all the rights relating to its actual office, in both the national and international spheres, and acquire the administration of the services from the Délégation. Featuring in the first place is the issue of the Common Interests, which the French Délégation manages on behalf of the Syrian and Lebanese Republics. These two States share an identical point of view.’

The initial French reply, conveyed by Helleu, was that the handing over of the Common Interests could be finalised only within the framework of a treaty, to which the Syrians and Lebanese replied that the French National Committee was not legally in a position to sign such a treaty. Helleu replied: ‘If France was considered fit to proclaim independence, when it did not have such a strongly constituted government as it has now, it is certainly capable of signing treaties.’ But Helleu knew better, as is clear from a report by the Délégation Générale in Beirut, which pointed out that before entering into any new negotiations the French National Committee should ‘determine its competence to bind France by an act which, constitutionally, must have the approval of a Parliament’. The report added that it would be easy to say that if the French National Committee in London was considered competent to grant independence, the French National Committee for Liberation in Algiers was equally competent ‘to engage and conclude with the States the necessary negotiations that this independence entails’. The report concluded: ‘Nevertheless, the Committee cannot juridically replace a properly constituted parliament to proceed with a ratification, with the result that the accords that it would sign with the governments could only have a provisional character.’
The Syrian leaders’ official visit to Egypt, October 1943

The morning after delivering the memorandum, Mardam Bey and al-Jabri left for Egypt on an official visit. They had been invited by Nahas Pasha immediately after they took office but had put off their visit pending an official visit by an Egyptian delegation representing King Farouk, the purpose of which was to offer Egypt’s congratulations on the election of the president and on the formation of a Nationalist government.

Saadallah al-Jabri and Jamil Mardam Bey arrived in Cairo on 21 October and received a warm welcome from both government and people. Significantly, as soon as the Syrian delegation arrived, King Farouk received them in his palace and expressed his personal pleasure at the Nationalists’ accession to power which would clear the way to independence. The King invited them to join him the next day at Friday prayers in Al-Azhar Mosque. *En route*, everywhere, the Syrian delegation met with warm enthusiasm by the Egyptian people, many of whom carried banners inscribed with messages of welcome and hailed the leaders of independent Syria by name. The Friday sermon focused on the subject of Arab unity and the benefits that would be derived from it. After prayers the King gave a lunch in honour of the Syrians and indicated his own personal involvement in the realisation of Arab unity. It was an exceptional gesture by King Farouk to so honour a delegation that did not include a head of state.

Mardam Bey and al-Jabri spent several days in Cairo during which they exchanged views with Nahas Pasha about inter-Arab relations in general and the possibility of creating a body that would ultimately lead the Arabs to unity. The Syrians expressed to Nahas Pasha their commitment to his formula and promised to continue their efforts with the other Arab states to attain Arab unity.

For their part, they presented a memorandum setting out their attitude towards Arab unity. In it they affirmed Syria’s willingness to accept the Lebanese claim to a separate state on the grounds that Lebanon had fulfilled the necessary requirements for statehood by emancipating itself from foreign tutelage and exercising its independence. Syria’s relations with Lebanon would be governed by the principle that the two countries work together in harmony for the consolidation of their independence. The memorandum expressed Syria’s eagerness to pave the way for Arab unity by removing all the artificial divisions that had been imposed upon the Arabs by the intrigues and ambitions of foreign powers. It also discussed the means by which Arab unity could be realised and the extent to which its definition could be expanded to encompass other Arab countries not
Syria's Quest for Independence

currently independent. It confirmed Syria's wish for an Arab federation to be established to institute total political, economic, social and cultural cooperation amongst the eight states of Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Palestine, Transjordan and Lebanon. It would be incumbent on these states to offer the necessary help to Arab countries which were still protectorates to enable them to join the federation at a later stage. Ideally, the memorandum added, Syria would like to see Arab unity materialise under a federal government.

French reply to the Syrian memorandum

Soon after Mardam Bey's return from Egypt, Helleu submitted to him the French Committee's reply to the Syrian memorandum of 20 October. In it the Committee expressed its pleasure with the development of constitutional life in Syria which 'responds fully to France's expectations', but added that France was determined to 'facilitate Syria's attainment of an independence, guaranteed by a treaty'. It affirmed that 'the Mandate still existed' and could only be terminated by a contractual agreement replacing the charter of the Mandate, where Franco-Syrian relations would be defined. The French Committee expressed its readiness to ratify the 1936 treaty, thereby transferring all the attributes of sovereignty to Syria.

At that very moment Helleu sent a telegram to Algiers saying: 'Our decision not to satisfy the demands of the Lebanese and the Syrians will create ferment that will result in serious disorders. The principal responsibility for maintaining order will fall on the British who will become the arbitrators of the situation and will not fail to make gains. It is urgent and essential that the Committee decides to send French troops in substantial numbers to Lebanon.' Instead of advising constructive negotiations to keep the temperature down, Helleu, the diplomat on the spot, took the extraordinary step of urging the French Committee to send troops to quell any uprising that might be triggered by French intransigence. The troops would be required essentially to head off British intervention.

Despite Mardam Bey's and al-Jabri's firm assurances to Helleu that they had no desire whatever to see France replaced by Britain, and despite their having expressed their fear on previous occasions that France itself might force the British hand by its own doing, Helleu and the French Committee still believed that the Syrians were playing the British card as the following telegram from the French Committee indicates: 'The texts of the memoranda submitted by the Syrian and Lebanese governments make no reference to the services managed
The Nationalists Return to Power

jointly by the British and ourselves, such as the Sûreté and the OCP [Organisation des Céréales Planifiées, which was created by the Allies for the distribution of wheat during the war]. This enlightens us as to the real origin of the demands that are presented to us.' Actually the Syrian government did raise the question of security and the OCP with the British government at the first opportunity, when Richard Casey visited Damascus at the beginning of November. Casey reported: 'Jamil Mardam mentioned the granting of visas as one of the attributes of sovereignty which he thought should be in their hands at once and said that any security modifications necessary could easily be arranged with us, but they must have a share in the control of their own frontiers. He also raised the question of the OCP... His criticism appeared to be that at present there were too many different authorities concerned.' 8 It was a set policy of the Syrian government not to discuss with the British what concerned Syria and France or with the French what concerned Syria and Britain.

The Franco-Syrian talks were postponed pending the return of Helleu from Algiers. The Syrian government let Helleu know before his departure that it could not accept the French Committee's reply to its memorandum as final and that it relied on him to report their views personally to the Committee. It promised him that it would take no action until he returned with a fresh approach that would meet its demands. The Syrian government kept strictly to its promise to Helleu not to disclose either publicly or privately to a third party any of the outstanding issues raised with the French. Despite its caution, the Syrian government found itself caught up in a major crisis because of events in Lebanon.

The Lebanese crisis

The Syrian government made it clear to the Lebanese government at their first meeting in early October that in dealing with the French on political matters, prudent diplomacy had to be exercised in order to avoid a head-on clash. The Syrians were also anxious to avert British interference in their relations with France and were apprehensive lest Spears's machinations succeeded in Lebanon. But the Lebanese government did not have in Lebanon the same homogeneous support as the Syrian government commanded in Syria, and was therefore less able to use the same degree of discretion in its negotiations with the French; any sign of secretiveness on the part of the Nationalists in Lebanon risked raising suspicions in their supporters' minds. The Syrian government's policy statement made to parliament on its appointment
was based on very broad lines yet received unanimous support in the Chamber, a fact which reflected the confidence the Syrian deputies had in their country’s leaders.

By contrast, the Lebanese government’s policy statement to parliament on 7 October 1943 was much more specific. In order to obtain the vote of confidence, the Lebanese prime minister had to enumerate in detail his government’s demands: the revision of the constitution, the substitution of Arabic for French as the official language and the variation of the national flag. (The Lebanese flag at that time was the French tricolour with a Cedar tree in the centre.) The French did not react immediately, but on 22 October, Helleu drew the attention of the Lebanese president to ‘the grave consequences’ of a unilateral revision of the constitution.

The Lebanese government carried forward its initiative by submitting a memorandum to Helleu on 22 October which was almost identical with the Syrian government’s. Helleu asked both the Syrian and Lebanese governments to await his return from Algiers; the Syrians agreed and kept the negotiations under wraps, but the Lebanese were less discreet: on 31 October the Lebanese prime minister declared that they had presented Helleu with a note demanding the transfer of the Common Interests and that Helleu had asked for a stay of 10 to 15 days. At the same time, the Lebanese president sought the support of the British through Spears. Nothing could have irritated the French more. As the Foreign Office and the private papers of Spears demonstrate, some members of the Lebanese government, in particular Camille Chamoun, were reporting in detail their conversations and exchanges with the French to Spears.9

On 5 November the French Committee issued a communiqué in Algiers saying: ‘The French Authorities will not be able to recognise the validity of the revision of the constitution without the Committee’s agreement.’ The same evening the Lebanese government replied with a communiqué stating that, in accordance with article 76, the government had submitted to the Chamber a bill revising certain articles which had become incompatible with the total independence of the country. The government then called on parliament to vote on these amendments on 8 November. These were: the abolition of all administrative functions and rights of the French, the omission of all references to the Mandate, the substitution of Arabic for French as an official language and the formal recognition of the present borders as final.

By contrast, when asked in parliament about the Syrian government’s negotiations with the French, following Riad al-Solh’s disclosures, Lutfi al-Haffar, then acting prime minister in the absence of al-Jabri and Mardam Bey in Egypt, replied that the government would like to postpone its exposé of the situation while negotiations were in
progress. He said: 'The Chamber must allow the government the liberty of choosing the right moment to reveal the talks with the French authorities.'

On 6 November the Syrian government realised that the Lebanese situation was heading towards a clash. Mardam Bey immediately called Colonel Oliva-Roget and offered to intervene with the Lebanese government, which he did the next day when he met Riad al-Solh. He also met Chataigneau in Beirut and asked him to try to find a solution that would safeguard the interests of both sides. After his meeting with al-Solh, Mardam Bey wrote in his diary: 'The Syrian government believed that the talks that were held between the Lebanese and the French authorities, following Syrian mediation, had resulted in a satisfactory solution.'

Meanwhile, the British did nothing. While the Syrians were actively trying to defuse a potentially explosive situation, Spears's attitude was passive. A Foreign Office report described Spears's attitude as follows: 'At the beginning of the recent crisis there is no evidence at all that Gen. Spears used his influence to check the attitude of the Lebanese government.'

The Syrian government had reservations about the unilateral decision by the Lebanese to amend article 1 of the constitution, which read: 'Great Lebanon is a unitary, independent state. Its borders are those that have been officially recognised by the Government of the French Republic, the Mandatory, and by the League of Nations and which limit it at present.' The amendment read: 'Lebanon is an independent State, unitary and sovereign. Its borders are those that limit it at present.' By introducing this amendment, Lebanon was presenting Syria, which had not yet recognised the frontiers of Lebanon as final, with a fait accompli. Lascelles, the British representative in Damascus, reported: 'Al-Jabri informed French delegate at Damascus that his government were very much disturbed by French communiqué. If any country had a bone to pick with Lebanon, it was Syria, but when Syria had learnt of Lebanese Prime Minister's declaration concerning maintenance of present frontiers and of unanimous support it had received from Lebanese public opinion, they had decided to support the Government fully.' This particular amendment was designed by the Lebanese government to allay the fears of those Lebanese who feared Syrian hegemony.

Meanwhile Helleu, who was on his way back from Algiers, contacted the Lebanese government from Cairo and asked it to postpone the parliamentary debate and specified that he was bringing from Algiers 'liberal directives concerning the negotiations that were to start soon'. But the Lebanese government, having gone so far publicly, could no longer retreat. Public opinion had been aroused. Parliament met on 8
November and adopted the government's proposals by the unanimous vote of those present. The opposition, led by the ex-president of the republic, Émile Eddé, withdrew from the session before the vote.

The French were outraged and Helleu, who returned to Beirut on 9 November, issued in the early hours of 11 November three decrees announcing the dissolution of parliament, the suspension of the constitution, the nullification of the amendments and the appointment of Émile Eddé as provisional chief of state and of government. The president, the prime minister, and most other ministers as well as certain deputies, were arrested in their homes before dawn and taken away. The Syrian government was informed of Helleu's measures by Oliva-Roget who went to see Mardam Bey at 7.15 a.m. the same morning. He reported later: 'The Minister [Mardam Bey] showed his great annoyance at this crisis and repeated what he had already said on the 10th during a conversation, which was transmitted that same evening to Mr Helleu: "It will be exploited against you by the British and the Americans."'12

The Syrian president called a meeting of the cabinet immediately to discuss the situation in Lebanon and its repercussions internationally. The Syrian government was aware of the urgency of taking measures to prevent public disorder in Syria and any physical attack on the French. It feared that if the situation got out of control, British military intervention might ensue, an eventuality it was determined to avoid. Only one day before the arrests in Lebanon, Lascelles told Mardam Bey that if disturbances were to occur in Lebanon and the French demanded that martial law be declared, then the British army would have to intervene.

On 13 November the university students went on strike in Damascus, shut down the schools and demonstrated. The prime minister and the minister of the interior appealed for calm and asked the demonstrators to trust their government which, on that same day, submitted a letter of protest to Oliva-Roget. The Syrian protest expressed the government's reservations concerning 'the newly created situation in Lebanon' and its regret about 'the decisions that were taken, which entailed the abolition of Lebanese independence and the suspension of all liberties'. It added: 'The Syrian government voices its protest about the arrest of the Lebanese president, ministers and deputies, an act which, besides being devoid of courtesy, is a violation of all rules that govern international relations.' In delivering this note of protest to Oliva-Roget, Mardam Bey told him that the text would not be made public so as to allow the French authorities to make 'honorable amends'.

On 13 November the British officially informed the Syrian government that the maintenance of order was ultimately a British responsibility. Saadallah al-Jabri passed on the information to the commander of
the Syrian gendarmerie and to the head of the Syrian police with instructions to avoid giving the British any pretext for intervention.

NOTES

1. FO 371/3580, 25 August 1943.
3. MAE, vol. 999, 4 October 1943.
4. Ibid., 16 October 1943.
5. Ibid., 20 October 1943.
6. Ibid., 27 October 1943.
7. Ibid.
8. FO 371/35291, 9 November 1943.
9. FO 371/35183, 7 and 26 October 1943.
10. FO 371/35194, 30 November 1943.
11. Ibid.
An eminent Syrian nationalist and deputy, Fakhri al-Baroudi was asked by the Syrian government to put forward unofficially to Oliva-Roget a number of proposals for the solution of the Lebanese crisis. Al-Baroudi’s informal approach was designed to sound out the French reaction, without the government having to run the risk of being formally rebuffed. It would thus obviate any strain that might arise between it and the French. The Syrian proposals were as follows:

The release of the Lebanese president and his colleagues, who would be invited to Damascus as guests of the Syrian government for negotiations with the French under the aegis of Syria; the nomination of a Franco-Syrian commission with a brief to find a solution that would respond to Lebanese demands while preserving French prestige. When agreement between the Lebanese and the French was reached, the outcome would be announced by a highly placed Syrian official. The Syrian government would undertake to maintain order in Syria in collaboration with the French. In a report to the French Committee, Oliva-Roget wrote: ‘Fakhri Baroudi explained that such a project would put an end to British intrigues and give Damascus the occasion to assume a predominant position in Arab affairs.’ Oliva-Roget promised to send these proposals to Catroux who was due to arrive in Beirut the following day.

On 15 November the Syrian parliament met to discuss the Lebanese crisis. A motion was tabled by 17 deputies asking the government about the steps that it had taken and the steps it intended to take in regard to the ‘grave’ Lebanese crisis. Mardam Bey read out the government’s reply which referred to the steps so far taken, namely the government’s warning to the French prior to 11 November to defuse the crisis, its subsequent letter of protest demanding the immediate release of the Lebanese president and his colleagues and its reservations about the new regime established by Helleu in Lebanon. Mardam Bey went on to say: ‘As for the regime of the Mandate, it has become more theoretical than real. When we consider the letter and the spirit and the logic of laws, this regime has fallen to such a degree of weakness, that we
estimate that it no longer constitutes a pretext justifying the abolition of an established independence.'

In this carefully worded sentence, Mardam Bey was in effect giving notice to the French that the Syrians considered the Mandate an obsolete concept that they would not accept in their future negotiations. On Syria's policy towards the Lebanese crisis, he expressed his government's hope that the arrival of Catroux in Lebanon would indicate that the crisis was on its way to being solved in a peaceful manner through the restoration of independence and constitutionalism. He added that the Syrian government would continue to adhere to a political procedure which had proved to be successful. Mardam Bey then appealed to the people to remain calm and to the deputies to restrain their emotions as any breach of security might deliver a blow to the 'edifice of independence'. The Syrian deputies responded to the government's appeal and voted for a motion protesting against the French action in Lebanon and expressing the wish of the Chamber for the return of constitutional life in Lebanon.

There was an uneasy calm. The peaceful demonstrations continued; the major cities went on strike, but no disturbances occurred that could provoke French military action. Reporting on the Syrian attitude, Oliva-Roget wrote:

The Syrian government is preparing itself to extract the maximum possible gains from this situation. It is clearly stating its demands and is mounting a press campaign and building up popular support which it will lean on when submitting these claims to us. It is skilful enough to draw profit from every occasion. It offered its mediation at the beginning of the Franco-Lebanese crisis. It interceded as a moderator on the eve of the breakup. There is no doubt that in their attitude towards us and in respect of public opinion the Syrian leaders have shown class.

On 17 November General de Gaulle made a declaration to the French consultative assembly in Algiers on what he called 'the unfortunate incident of Lebanon'. It was a balanced and reasoned declaration devoid of emotive words, a fact which suggested that the French Committee was in a conciliatory mood. De Gaulle announced that Catroux was delegated to Lebanon with directives to study locally, in agreement with the Lebanese, the best means of settling the incident. 'The intention of the Committee', he said, 'is to establish in Lebanon a normal constitutional situation, so that we can negotiate with the Lebanese government a settlement of our common affairs, while each of us enjoys full independence.' De Gaulle then made a reference to the Committee's desire to give satisfaction to the 'legitimate preoccupations' of the Arab States and added that it viewed with sympathy the Arabs' wish to unite. This was the first official statement by the French about their attitude to the inter-Arab talks. The General then praised the Syrian
leaders in these words: ‘Perhaps it is worth mentioning in this context that the political sense shown by the statesmen of Damascus is one of the most important elements for the future development of these federalist ideas. I must say how much I am personally honoured to have the friendship of many of those statesmen of Damascus.’

On 18 November Mardam Bey sent Helleu the French text of his speech in parliament, together with a letter in which he underlined the efforts of his government to maintain order in Syria despite ‘the disappointments and emotion aroused by the Lebanese crisis’. He expressed his hope that a fair settlement would not be long in coming, and that the normal situation would be quickly restored at the same time as public liberties, the constitution and independence. Mardam Bey ended his letter on a note of warning: ‘As for the recent decisions that your Excellency has taken and in which you have envisaged the possibility of proceeding with new elections, allow me to draw your attention to the doubts and apprehensions which this could provoke in public opinion.’

Early in the morning of 20 November Oliva-Roget went to see Mardam Bey to convey to him a message from Catroux. The interview as recorded by Mardam Bey verbatim, went as follows:

The Colonel: I returned yesterday from Beirut where I met General Catroux; I found him worried by the development of the situation and by the measures that had been taken in Lebanon. He was trying to find a solution which would reconcile the interests of Lebanon with the honour of France. He is now staying in a private house. He met and talked to many personalities and he now wishes to meet you for lunch tomorrow, Sunday, in Shtaura. He wants to take your advice on this matter and we believe that your opinion will carry the utmost weight in finding a solution to this crisis, since the problem has now become an Anglo-French political issue; the British military circles do not fully endorse the British political stance, as they believe that efforts should be geared to military action, especially as the military situation in the Dodecanese Islands and in Italy is not as it should be. [In his memoirs, *Dans la bataille de Méditerranée*, Catroux wrote: ‘I gave up staying in the Résidence des Pins where, I knew, not a single Lebanese would accept to come.’]

Mardam Bey: I heard that Mr Casey has arrived in Beirut and I heard that he has much praise for General Catroux. Have they met yet?

The Colonel: I think they have.

Mardam Bey: Have they agreed on anything? We do care that a complete agreement be reached between the two great authorities in Syria since it would not be possible to solve anything without a specific agreement.
The Expansion of National Power

The Colonel: I do not know what happened, but I have to say that the dispute has become an Anglo-French one, and it is difficult for us to back down on everything though certain errors have been committed.

Mardam Bey: What is the purpose of inviting us? Our point of view is well known, namely the return to the status quo ante; it would be inconceivable to contemplate new elections or expect retreat from all positions by the Lebanese.

The Colonel: I do not know, but I personally find a return to the status quo ante very difficult, as this would mean a total defeat for us. This would be impossible because of the high emotions aroused in French circles. I would like to say that I am not trying to know what your opinion is nor to relate General Catroux’s opinion; I am simply making personal remarks. It would be possible to form a provisional government and call for new elections.

Mardam Bey: You realise that all the observations which were made to you by us were exactly right? How events proved them to be so; that you have put yourselves and the country in a fix from which you cannot extricate yourselves?

The Colonel: General Catroux and myself are of this opinion, but we have to do something. I went yesterday to Ain Annub to visit Habib Abi Shahla and Majid Arsalan [the Lebanese ministers who escaped to the Lebanese mountains and declared themselves the representatives of the constitutional government of Lebanon] and held talks with them — I had to walk in the midst of armed demonstrators.

Mardam Bey: What did Abi Shahla and Arsalan propose? I believe that they will accept nothing less than a return to the status quo ante.

The Colonel: Exactly. I informed General Catroux of their opinion. I think that because of your personal prestige with everyone, you are able to play an important role, not only in regard to this problem, but to all the important questions, particularly to the Arab question.

Mardam Bey: I will inform the President and my colleagues and will call you later.

Immediately after this interview Mardam Bey went to see President al-Quwatli and the Prime Minister al-Jabri who both agreed to accept Catroux’s invitation. They also thought that it would be useful to invite Casey and Spears to dine with them that same evening in Damascus. Mardam Bey called Colonel Brenan, the British consul general, to come to see him and asked him to convey the president’s invitation immediately to Casey. Brenan sent a telegram to Beirut saying:

Minister for Foreign Affairs informed me this morning that Colonel Oliva had this morning conveyed to him an invitation . . . to lunch with General Catroux tomorrow at Shtaura. Before meeting Catroux Jamil was anxious to discuss with the Minister of State and His Majesty’s Minister.
requested me to convey to General Spears invitation from the President to Mr Casey, General Spears and Mr Lascelles to dine tonight. If this was impossible the Minister for Foreign Affairs would be prepared to come to Beirut this afternoon to see Mr Casey.

Spears sent back this curious reply:

Please see President (not, repeat not M.F.A.) tonight and tell him personally from me that I feel a deplorable impression would be created were he and his Government to lunch in the Lebanon with official representatives of Algiers Committee at a moment when Lebanese President and Ministers are imprisoned a few miles away. You should make it clear that while we of course do not object to Syrians discussing Lebanese crisis or other business with Catroux, we ourselves have the crisis in hand and intend to obtain early satisfaction for our demands with a view to its solution. There can therefore be no question at the stage now reached of Syrian mediation or negotiations for a compromise by third parties - if indeed this is intended.

Brennan did not carry out Spears's instructions (as is evident from Mardam Bey's records of the day), otherwise the Franco-Lebanese crisis could have turned into an Anglo-Syrian crisis. Interestingly, the above-mentioned telegrams were drawn from Spears's private papers. There is no record of them in the British Public Record Office. The sequence of events of 20 November was recorded in detail by Mardam Bey:

At 12.30 I went to the Presidency, where I remained until 2 p.m. During that time I telephoned Colonel Oliva-Roget concerning our meeting with Catroux. We agreed that it would take place in Beirut tomorrow at 11 a.m.; then I telephoned Colonel Brennan who informed me that Mr Casey regretted that he could not accept the invitation as he was leaving that same day and that Spears was unable to come because of the Lebanese crisis. I asked him to inform Spears that I would be in Beirut tomorrow and that I would call on him at 9.30 a.m. Then I spoke to the American representative and asked him to inform Wadsworth that I would call on him tomorrow at 1 p.m.

Mardam Bey also recorded his meeting with the American representative in Damascus: 'Mr Varley showed me the note of protest that the American government had sent to the French Committee and informed me of the measures that the British government intended to take if the French remained obstinate.' These measures were to be the declaration of martial law and the initiation of talks between the Lebanese and French to be held not in Algiers, but in London. As both these measures were totally unacceptable to Syria, the meeting between Catroux and Mardam Bey had by then become crucial.

On 21 November Mardam Bey left for Beirut. He called on Spears who was with Lascelles. According to Mardam Bey, his meeting with
Spears was not very friendly: 'I discussed with him several matters and told him that I had come to convey to Catroux the view of the Syrian government for a solution to the Lebanese crisis.' Mardam Bey did not disclose to Spears what that view was when he realised that Spears was trying to dissuade him from involving Syria in the crisis, but told him that he would return to see him later.

Mardam Bey reported his meeting with Catroux as follows:

I arrived in General Catroux's residence. I was met in the hall by Catroux who was surrounded by a group of young men, who, I learnt later, were Maronites who had come to express their support for Eddé. Catroux's welcome was warm. He seemed calm and lucid. He opened the conversation with high praise for the wise attitude of the Syrian government and for its conduct of affairs, attesting to its leaders' political maturity. He went on to relate the development of the crisis in Lebanon and expressed his displeasure with it. He said that he was in a critical situation, wanting to annul all the irregular measures by Helleu, while retaining France's influence.

The conversation was then recorded in direct speech form:

Mardam Bey: You have saved me the trouble of explanation. This is not surprising coming from a man like yourself, known for his perspicacity and far-sightedness.
Catroux: How do you see the solution of the crisis?
Mardam Bey: I see a return to the status quo ante; any other solution will have unpleasant repercussions on both the internal and external levels. This might even be 'lourd de conséquences'. We have been at pains trying to calm the situation in Syria, by explaining that your personal wisdom will prevail, restoring matters to what they were. Yes, it is true that restoring matters is a form of retraction; but you can account for it by saying that you were sent by the Committee to investigate and when you discovered the irregularity of the measures taken, you courageously proceeded to rectify the situation. Until now it is not known that an external pressure [British and American] has been put on you, but the news will come out soon. It would be much more discrediting to give in then.
Catroux: This is my judgement too and I thank you for this valuable view, which I will transmit to Algiers.

As Mardam Bey was taking his leave, he left with Catroux a memorandum from the Syrian government, confirming Syria's view as expressed in their conversation. In his memoirs, Catroux wrote: 'The communication he [Mardam Bey] imparted to me was found reproduced in a letter that he left with me and which constituted a declaration of solidarity with Lebanon. I did not misunderstand its significance.'
Syria's Quest for Independence

Syrian memorandum, signed by Mardam Bey, stated: ‘It is with the intention of dispelling any doubt about the attitude of the Syrian government, that I have the honour to confirm to your Excellency the position taken by this government in regard to the necessity of reverting back to the Lebanese institutions as they were originally established, so that we can appease the emotion which has been aroused and which could have dire consequences.’

After leaving Catroux, Mardam Bey called on Wadsworth and informed him of the Syrian government’s attitude to the Lebanese crisis and of his conversation with Catroux. He asked him whether there were differences between Spears and General Holmes, commander of the Ninth Army. The American replied: ‘Regrettfully these differences exist, and if nothing changes, martial law will be declared tomorrow and the consequences will be very grave. There is still hope that the crisis might be solved.’ Mardam Bey went back to see Spears whom he found ‘more friendly’ than in the morning. He informed him of his conversation with Catroux and of the ‘unequivocal’ attitude of the Syrian government. Spears was, to quote Mardam Bey, ‘worried and feared that de Gaulle would reject any compromise’. Mardam Bey assured him that Catroux was very understanding and said that his own feelings were that the crisis would be solved; he added that the Syrian government would regard a British take-over with disfavour. Spears’s report to the Foreign Office on his meeting with Mardam Bey was not accurate:

Syrian minister for foreign affairs called on me today. He told me that he had informed Catroux that unless the President and Ministers were reinstated, situation in Syria would get completely out of hand. Catroux told him he was now of this opinion but he was afraid that the National Committee and de Gaulle could not be made to see this. Minister said it was impossible to hold Syria for more than 24 or at most 48 hours longer. Minister also told me Druzes had sent emissaries to him to say that their people would rise in a very short time.

Mardam Bey had said nothing about an impending uprising in Syria. In Mardam Bey’s detailed personal minutes, nothing approaching Spears’s allegations is mentioned. On the contrary, they explicitly show that the Syrians were careful about giving the impression of imminent unrest in Syria. Was Spears trying to initiate a British take-over in both countries? He had been urging his government to take immediate action in Lebanon before third parties had time to intervene and so frustrate his moment of triumph in the Levant. He had tried to keep Syria out, but when this failed, he then tried to raise the alarm that Syria too was on the brink of turmoil.

On 15 November, the day Catroux arrived in Beirut, Spears had sent a telegram to London saying: ‘I most earnestly urge that we should not allow ourselves to be intimidated by threats to withdraw the French
from the Levant. I have no doubt that Catroux has made and will make the utmost use of this blackmail threat.' He went on to give assurances that Britain did not lack the manpower necessary to run these states. All the officials [in Lebanon and Syria] would indeed cooperate far more willingly with us than they have ever done with the French.'\textsuperscript{5} A note by Casey dated 11 November 1943 revealed: 'Louis Spears wanted to institute British Martial Law at once and to take over the government [in Lebanon]. I did not agree with him as it would oblige British troops to fire on French and Lebanese.'\textsuperscript{6}

Spears's stance was strikingly similar to Churchill's. As early as 13 November, at the very outset of the crisis, Churchill all but urged President Roosevelt to act in concert with him to eject de Gaulle from his leadership. There is no doubt in my mind', he wrote to the president, 'that this [the French action in Lebanon] is a foretaste of what de Gaulle's leadership of France means.' If de Gaulle failed to reinstate the Lebanese president, 'we should withdraw our recognition from the French National Committee and stop the process of arming the French troops in North Africa.' He added: 'Meanwhile I am enquiring carefully into the state of our forces in the Levant.' Was Spears doing Churchill's bidding? 'At the same time', Churchill continued, 'should action be taken it would be necessary to take precautions in North Africa, for I assure you there is nothing this man will not do if he has armed forces at his disposal.'\textsuperscript{7}

At this early stage of the crisis it was not at all clear that General de Gaulle had ordered the arrests or whether Helleu was acting on his own. Strange that Churchill, reputed for his undeviating dedication to winning the war, should agitate so forcefully for the weakening of a military ally to the detriment of the overall war effort. Was Churchill's personal dislike of de Gaulle so intense that it clouded his judgement and sense of proportion in matters far more vital to Britain's interests than the dispersal of a newly elected government in a small Arab country he claimed he did not covet? How did that compare with the arrests of Gandhi and Nehru in India and with fighting Rashid Ali in Iraq? De Gaulle was not given the benefit of the doubt despite indications to the contrary. On the morning of the arrests, de Gaulle instructed Catroux to proceed immediately to Lebanon 'with the mission of re-establishing a normal constitutional situation, without disavowing Helleu'.

In fact, as it transpired, the General had no hand in Helleu's decision as may be deduced from his telegram to Helleu of 13 November and which can be found in the documents at the Quai d'Orsay. De Gaulle wrote: 'The forceful measures that you thought you had to take were perhaps necessary. In any case I have to consider them so, since you have taken them.' This telegram is a clear indication that Helleu acted
without formal orders from de Gaulle. Thus, within hours of the arrests, the crisis was no longer limited to tension between France and Lebanon, but had also led to tension between Britain and France. The former, represented by Churchill and Spears, was trying to dislodge France from Syria and Lebanon as well as de Gaulle from his leadership, while the latter, through Catroux, was trying to repair the damage and keep the British at bay without too much loss of face. The Foreign Office, unlike Churchill and Spears, was more circumspect. It was aware that Spears had mishandled the situation. Eden’s attitude was expressed in one of his minutes: ‘The Lebanese government were not without blame, and that if the French had not taken such precipitate and unjustified action, we might well have thought it right to support the French against the attitude adopted by the Lebanese.’8 Maurice Peterson at the Foreign Office put it quite simply: ‘It is common knowledge that Sir E. Spears does not want an agreement between the French and the Lebanese.’9

On 22 November the French Committee issued a communiqué in Algiers declaring that on the recommendation of Catroux the Committee ‘has decided to carry out his proposals... regarding the reinstatement of Mr Beshara al-Khoury... M. Helleu has been asked to return to Algiers. The Committee has decided to free the Lebanese ministers. The Committee has confirmed its decision to open negotiations with the Syrian Republic to bring into harmony France’s Mandate with the regime of independence promised to the States.’

The French Committee’s communiqué did not go far enough to meet the Lebanese or Syrian demands. It called for the reinstatement of the Lebanese president, but not the government. It did not rescind the decree suspending the constitution and, above all, it mentioned the Mandate. The Syrian government immediately called a press conference to put its case and handed a note to the French authorities stating that the government, which represented the ‘aspirations of the country’, had never accepted the Mandate and that it would ‘not accept the Mandate to serve as a basis for negotiations’.

On 22 November Oliva-Roget contacted Mardam Bey and told him that Catroux had sent the Syrian government’s proposal to Algiers with his ‘personal recommendations to act accordingly’. Catroux actually went further. He informed de Gaulle that the measures announced by the Committee were not sufficient and that he ‘deplored’ the fact that the Committee had not followed his recommendations and insisted that it should ‘reverse its position’. In a second message Catroux wrote:

Jamil Mardam has told me verbally and afterwards took the trouble of confirming in writing, that the only solution to the Lebanese affair, to which the Syrian government ‘remains unreservedly attached’, was the re-establishment of both the institutions and the men. I do not feel I can
carry out your instructions. These seem to me to have been conceived with a view to resisting British demands. I can of course notify the decision of the Committee to the President, then tender my resignation. But this method will only serve the British. I apologise to the Committee for being unable to follow its instructions. I will give my agreement to the reinstatement of the Ministry.\(^\text{10}\)

By 22 November all Helleu's decrees had been reversed; the Lebanese president and ministers were back in their offices. On 24 November Mardam Bey travelled back to Beirut to congratulate the president and ministers. He also called on Catroux to congratulate him on the 'wise' action he took to rectify the situation, but added that it was now necessary to speed up the process of handing over all administrative powers and settling Franco-Syrian relations in an appropriate manner, as procrastination would harm the French.

The Syrian government's attitude to the Mandate

With the Lebanese crisis behind it, the Syrian government was now ready to tackle its own problem with the French. On 25 November Catroux visited Damascus where he held meetings with President al-Quwatli, al-Jabri and Mardam Bey, who told him that they wished to take over administrative powers as soon as possible. Catroux raised the question of a treaty, but the Syrians told him what they had been saying all along, that 'present circumstances' were not favourable for the conclusion of a treaty. Mardam Bey noted that the talks were 'cordial'. Catroux promised to put forward their argument to the French Committee in Algiers.

Two days earlier the Syrian prime minister had delivered a speech in Aleppo which was considered a declaration of government policy. Speaking of Syria's claims, al-Jabri declared: 'We ask the foreign authorities to yield to us all our rights. On the administrative and social level, we are working hard to allow the country to govern itself. I wish to remind the functionaries that the only recourse they have is to the national and independent government... They are still repeating the word Mandate. Who told them that this country ever accepted or admitted the Mandate? We are independent and we are asking them to hand over the instruments of our independence.' On the question of a treaty al-Jabri said: 'Negotiations take place between nations on the basis of equality and liberty. We must therefore have everything in our hands before we can negotiate.'

The Syrians were aware that the settlement of their affairs with the French could no longer be delayed. They were under pressure from public opinion and parliament, but they were not prepared to allow a
crisis à la libanaise to develop in Syria. Their approach to the French had to be more subtle and appeared in the guise of unofficial warnings to the effect that they would never allow negotiations to proceed from the premiss of the Mandate. The first warning shot had come in a semi-official communiqué of 22 November. The second warning came on the same day in the speech of al-Jabri, who was speaking unofficially on that occasion. The third warning appeared in an unsigned article, drafted by Mardam Bey, in the newspaper Al-Insba which was considered the organ of the Nationalists. The article was published on 25 November to coincide with Catroux's visit to Damascus. It stated that Syria rejected the French Committee's proposition to enter into negotiations to 'bring into harmony France's Mandate with the regime of independence', and listed the juridical grounds for Syria's rejection of the assertion that the Mandate existed:

Firstly, the reason for which the Mandate was created was expunged when the French delegate Robert de Caix announced to the League of Nations in 1937 that it no longer existed (following the signature of the 1936 treaty).

Secondly, when the Franco-Syrian Treaty was concluded and signed by both France and Syria in 1936, it explicitly recognised Syrian independence. The fact that the French parliament did not ratify the treaty, did not in any way detract from the treaty's validity, because ratification was merely a condition for the enforcement of rights and obligations imposed on Syria by France for France's sole interest.

Thirdly, France, known as Vichy France, declared in 1941 its withdrawal from the League of Nations, thereby renouncing all its rights and obligations in respect of the League. The French Committee of National Liberation did not have the right to maintain its claim to the Mandate since the Committee was not recognised as the legitimate government of France by the very powers that had formed the League.

Fourthly, Catroux's Proclamation of Independence constituted an explicit document confirming Syria's independence.

Fifthly, the Atlantic Charter, by recognising the right of all nations to their independence, has effectively abolished the Mandate.

The nature of the Syrian approach was well understood by the French. Colonel Oliva-Roget commented in one of his reports to Algiers: 'From 22 November onwards, not a day has passed without the Syrian leaders proclaiming either through one of them or through a deputy, or the press, that they do not wish to hear about the Mandate. The government is leading the attack on the French position without restraint.'

On 25 November a Syrian deputy, Ahmad al-Sharabati (who was later to become minister of defence), tabled a motion in parliament calling on the government to take 'firm action' by taking over 'immediately' all
the attributes of sovereignty according to the 115 articles of the constitution. This session took place in the absence of the prime minister and minister of foreign affairs, who were engaged in talks with Catroux. The date for the debate was fixed for 27 November. The French authorities in Damascus believed that Ahmad al-Sharabati was 'a British agent' and that Spears through Richard Beaumont, the political officer in Damascus (who was later to become ambassador in various Arab countries) was engineering a crisis between the French and the Syrians. Al-Sharabati, by specifying that the Syrian constitution consisted of 115 articles, was *ipso facto* asking for the abolition of article 116 which referred to the Mandate (a French reservation on the constitution of 1928). Through this motion, he was bringing the current Franco-Syrian relations and talks into the public domain, whereas the government was still treading with caution.

On 27 November, Mardam Bey noted in his diary:

I went to the Presidency where Saadallah informed me that the deputies were determined to discuss foreign affairs and he was clearly worried and upset. The President was not pleased either. At 3.30 p.m. I went to Parliament. Saadallah was in Fares al-Khoury's office. Some deputies entered; among them were Sharabati, Adnan al-Atasi and Nazem al-Qudsı; a heated discussion ensued between them and Saadallah who became overexcited and did not control himself or his language. I was not much perturbed and told the deputies to debate whatever they pleased and that I would answer for the government. The session started with speeches by al-Qudsı, al-Atasi and others making reference to the Mandate and in particular article 116 of the Constitution. I replied with an impromptu speech saying that we totally shared their views, that the country had never recognised and would never recognise the Mandate, that our independence was real and that the Prime Minister's speech in Aleppo constituted the reply of the Syrian government to the Algiers communiqué. As for article 116, we have never recognised it. It was a French reservation which in no way related to the Constitution of 1928.

I then congratulated the Lebanese government and people on the results achieved and said that if Syria were to revolt, matters would be different. I also congratulated the deputies for their legitimate desire to know how our negotiations were developing and I assured them that matters were moving much faster than they suspected. I promised to give them more details in a future session.

My speech was well received in the Chamber. The President and Saadallah, who did not attend the session, told me when I met them later that they heard about my speech and were most pleased with the outcome.

After Mardam Bey's speech the deputies voted unanimously for a motion requesting the president of the assembly to fix a date for a session where the president of the republic and the deputies would
take the oath of allegiance to the 115 articles of the constitution. Olivaroget immediately informed the acting Délégué Général, Chataigneau, that this motion was tantamount to the 'suppression of Article 116, which meant the suppression of the French reservations'. He urged that the French authorities register their reservation with the Syrian government on this action, which he considered to be analogous to that of the Lebanese, though procedurally different. To this Chataigneau replied: 'Since no official notification was made by the Syrian government and since the position of the Committee of Liberation is sufficiently known, I estimate that it is not convenient, for the time being, to affirm the rights of France to the Syrian government.'

Thus the Syrians managed to abolish the article which referred to the Mandate, without provoking a confrontation with the French. Article 116 was simply dropped. The president and the deputies ignored it without fanfare when they took their oath.

On 1 December, Saadallah al-Jabri delivered a major speech in parliament. He said that his government did not recognise the Mandate, that it had no intention of concluding any treaty and that it had asked for the immediate transfer of all administrative powers. He added that his government would adopt a policy aiming at Arab unity and that it would continue to participate in the war effort of the Allies. He ended by informing parliament that he had notified the French that henceforth the Syrian government would not accept any directive that was not enacted by the Syrian parliament. Al-Jabri was defining his government's official stance before embarking on negotiations with the French.

On 2 December the French cultural counsellor in Syria, M. Bounours, saw Mardam Bey to discuss the implementation of a cultural convention which had been worked out in 1936 between the French and the Syrian government. The French had wanted to carve for themselves a privileged cultural position in Syria and Lebanon, because by fostering a cultural affinity for France, they reckoned, they could ensure that French political influence would filter through. Reporting his meeting with Mardam Bey, Bounours said that the Minister 'was fully disposed to re-examine the draft law of the Franco-Syrian cultural convention and to make amendments favourable to French interests. He added, however, that the Syrians were going to obtain or conquer their independence, the choice between these two verbs depended on the French.'

On 4 December Count Stanislas Ostrorog arrived in Damascus. He was a French diplomat who had established personal links with the Nationalists in 1936 during the treaty negotiations. General de Gaulle sent him as his personal representative to Syria and Lebanon without 'a definite brief'. (He later became director of the political bureau in the
Levant.) Upon arrival in Syria, he called on the president and members of the government and later reported directly to de Gaulle about his meetings with the president, the prime minister and the foreign minister. About his meeting with the president, Ostrorog wrote that pleasantries were exchanged and that the president did not encourage discussion of the outstanding problems. Ostrorog understood from that that the political problems had to be discussed with the government. Of his meeting with al-Jabri, Ostrorog wrote: 'The conversation with Saadallah Jabri was very general. He certainly has goodwill and does not hide his desire to come to an understanding with France that will allow an independent Syria to lean on us for support against British ambitions.'

The meeting between Mardam Bey and Ostrorog was more substantive: 'With Jamil Mardam, whose intelligence and political sense you [de Gaulle] know, the meeting was very different. Evoking the memories of the negotiations of 1936 he regretted that our efforts did not succeed, while clearly making the point that that procedure belonged to the past and that now we should find another one. He expressed the hope that General Catroux would return quickly and carry out his promise of a new regime.' Ostrorog concluded his report by saying that the proposals he (Ostrorog) had put forward before his departure from Algiers for 'a closer and more precise entente with Damascus seem "dépassées". The conclusions which I have arrived at exclude all possibility of a regular treaty between France and the States of the Levant.' Ostrorog's conclusions reflected the prevailing attitude of the Syrian government towards a treaty with France. He also recommended the transfer of the Common Interests which had now assumed a symbolic value in public opinion. He finished his report with the words: 'Let us yield with grace that which we have no longer the force to keep.'

Franco-Syrian agreement on the transfer of administrative powers

Catroux, who had meanwhile returned to Algiers to report to the French Committee, sent a message to Chataigneau on 8 December asking him to inform the Syrian and Lebanese governments that the Committee had accepted the principle of an early transfer of the Common Interests, the security services, the frontier control and the control of the nomadic tribes. Catroux added that the governments would understand that the transfer of the last three services would have to be preceded by an accord between themselves and the French and British military commands.
Catroux's message was accompanied by the French Committee's policy statement for the Levant States. It summarised the political developments since 1941 thus:

French policy in 1941 was aimed at preserving France's advantage by means of treaties. But the newly elected governments of Syria and Lebanon rejected the Mandate: in Syria on the grounds that it had never been recognised by Syria, and in Lebanon on the grounds that it had been abolished by the Atlantic Charter. This fact notwithstanding, these states reckon that it is necessary to have a modus vivendi for the duration of the war, to be regulated, not by a general treaty, but by specific accords relating to specific subjects. In response, the French National Committee of Liberation has agreed to transfer the administration of the Common Interests to them, but insists that its relation with them be settled by a definitive treaty. France's friendly attitude should in no way be allowed to undermine its rights as defined by the Mandate and the Proclamation of Independence of June 1941.

The Committee concluded its instructions with the words: 'Wait, remain in place, adapt to the conditions of the moment, preserve strictly our rights, seek an understanding with Great Britain; these are the lines of our policy of conservation that we should follow in the Levant.' In short, the French Committee decided to satisfy the demands of Syria and Lebanon for the time being, while reserving its right to remain in the area once France had regained its power. The French were simply playing for time until more favourable circumstances arose.

On December 19 Catroux returned to Beirut from Algiers and on 22 December he went to Damascus to negotiate and conclude an agreement over the administrative powers. Upon his arrival in Damascus, Catroux met the Syrian leadership who invited the Lebanese government to join in the negotiations. The meeting was held in the presence of the Syrian president to whom Catroux delivered a letter from the French Committee. The letter expressed the Committee's wish 'to facilitate the establishment of a regime satisfactory to all parties concerned', and so authorised General Catroux 'to accede in the largest possible measure to the demands concerning the transfer to the Syrian government of certain attributes of power held by the French Authorities'. The letter did not list all the administrative powers that the French held. Although the letter was written in the friendliest of terms, the Syrian government refused to accept it as it listed certain administrative powers which could be transferred immediately, while omitting others. In the face of strong objections from the Syrians, General Catroux withdrew the letter and agreed to issue a common communiqué with the Syrian and Lebanese governments.

After much debate, Catroux and the Syrian and Lebanese sides agreed
to observe a *modus vivendi*, since they had not reached agreement on matters in dispute. The communiqué issued at the end of the meeting emphasised that the exchange of views was carried out ‘in an atmosphere of complete cordiality and mutual understanding’. It added that an agreement was reached between General Catroux and the governments of Syria and Lebanon for the transfer to these governments of ‘the attributes exercised in their name by the French Authorities'; as a result of this agreement, the text prescribed that ‘the Common Interests, with their personnel, will be transferred to the two states, which will have the right of legislation and regulation as from 1 January 1944. The procedure by which the transfer of power was to be effected, would be defined in special accords.’

On 23 December the Syrian prime minister announced in parliament that his government had concluded an agreement with the French on the transfer of the Common Interests, and paid a special tribute to General Catroux’s ‘spirit of understanding’ and to the ‘intelligence and tact of Jamil Mardam Bey, who was able to find adequate solutions to difficult problems’.

In his report to de Gaulle on his negotiations in Damascus, Catroux described his adversaries as follows:

> The Lebanese team is entirely under the influence of the men of Damascus. The Damascene team, in which Saadallah al-Jabri and Jamil Mardam form the driving centre, acts with authority. This team has learnt from its previous experience in power; it has modified its methods but not its objectives and it knows how to avoid excesses and exploit situations. It declares that it wishes to realise the independence of Syria not only in regard to France, but also in regard to the Anglo-Saxon Powers. By disengaging itself from all foreign bonds it appears in the eyes of the Arab world as a more completely independent government than those of Egypt or Iraq.16

Catroux followed up his report with a note advising the French Committee ‘to abstain from mentioning the Mandate’.

The accord over the Common Interests brought about an atmosphere of understanding and relaxation in Franco-Syrian relations. It was therefore not surprising that much indignation was felt by the French, Syrians and Lebanese when the BBC Arabic Service broadcast on 26 December that the agreement over the Common Interests would not put an end to the Mandate. Catroux reported that the Lebanese President Beshara al-Khouri was ‘extremely upset’ by this assertion and had informed him of his feelings.17 Catroux protested to General Spears, who immediately sent the following message to the Foreign Office: ‘Catroux was highly indignant, and said it would hardly be possible to misrepresent more completely both what he had done and
the spirit in which he had done it. Throughout his recent negotiations he had scrupulously avoided basing himself on the mandate.'

Spears himself did not interfere during the negotiations. He had in fact been restrained by Churchill during their encounter in Cairo on 9 December, at the request of Anthony Eden. In his personal notes about his interview with Churchill, Spears wrote: 'He spoke to me of the danger inherent in the position in the Levant which might raise issues of positive danger to ourselves in other parts of the world. What people might learn to do against the French in the Levant might be turned against us later. We should discourage the throwing of stones since we had greenhouses of our own acres and acres of them.'

Mardam Bey's visits to Iraq and Saudi Arabia

The Syrian government, having signed an agreement with the French, immediately turned its attention to the task of consolidating its relations with the Arab countries. On 29 December a Syrian delegation headed by Jamil Mardam Bey left for Iraq on an official visit. Upon arrival in Baghdad the regent, Prince Abdel-Ilah, received them and expressed his country's satisfaction at seeing the Nationalists back in power and at their success in concluding an agreement with the French that would consolidate the independence of Syria. Mardam Bey held official talks with the Iraqi government about the project for Arab unity, emphasising to the Iraqis that the Syrians favoured a form of unity that would encompass all the Arab states. He warned the Iraqis that unless the Arabs took immediate action to promote unity amongst themselves, the prevailing favourable circumstances would not recur for a long time. He told the Iraqis: 'If we do not profit from this historical moment we would be projecting to the world a poor image of ourselves and exposing our countries to new foreign ambitions and experiments. For our part, we have already told the Egyptians that we would be ready for the greatest sacrifices to achieve unity.'

In his personal notes Mardam Bey reported: 'The delegation spent 11 days in Iraq. It received a warm welcome from the Regent, the government and various Iraqi organisations. Discussions over Arab unity were held between our delegation and the Iraqi Prime Minister together with other officials. Views were exchanged on the basis of the consultations for Arab unity that had taken place in Cairo. The talks were extremely friendly and resulted in complete agreement.'

While he was in Baghdad, Mardam Bey took the opportunity of talking informally to Loy Henderson, the American ambassador to Iraq and a trusted friend of President Roosevelt. The United States was
clearly emerging as a great power, whose stature in world affairs was bound to have influence over the old colonial powers. Mardam Bey told Henderson that Britain’s policy towards the Arabs had failed because of its rigid attachment to the old colonial tradition without taking account of present circumstances, and that it was therefore important for the United States to mediate between Britain and the Arab countries in the interests of both. Such American efforts would help to realise Arab unity which would serve the cause of democracy as the Arab countries – comprising a grouping of more than 50 million people – opposed fascism. If Arab unity was achieved, democracy would have a strong base in the Mediterranean now and in the future. Mardam Bey went on to say that in the last century Britain had occupied certain Arab areas in order to safeguard its colonial interests, but that by then, with the deployment of long-range aircraft diminishing, as it were, the value of the navy, the continued occupation of such areas had become a burden on Britain without a corresponding benefit in strategic value and had, moreover, become damaging to its political interests. This was because the occupation was repugnant to the Arabs in particular and harmful to Britain’s international relations in general. Should, therefore, the United States succeed in influencing Britain to take the enlightened path, it would receive a favourable response from the Arabs.

Before leaving Damascus for Baghdad, Mardam Bey had received a telegram from King Ibn Saud expressing his great pleasure at the agreement that was concluded with Catroux and inviting him to visit Saudi Arabia at his convenience. Mardam Bey travelled to Riyadh on 25 February 1944. Several meetings were held between the Syrian delegation and Saudi officials, followed by a tête-à-tête meeting between the king and Mardam Bey. At that meeting Mardam Bey discussed with the king the project for Arab unity as proposed by Nahas Pasha and gave him an exposé of the talks that were held with the Iraqis in January. The king had misgivings about the project as he was particularly suspicious of any initiative taken by Nuri al-Said. He feared that, under the guise of Arab unity, Nuri Pasha would really be working towards the formation of a Greater Syria under the aegis of the Hashemites. Mardam Bey assured the king that in that respect the Syrian position had been made clear to the Iraqis, who did not in any way object. He went on to explain that the postwar era would be an era that would require close cooperation between the smaller nations of the world in order to prevent exploitation by the greater powers, and that the Arabs had now an opportunity not to be missed. King Abdel Aziz, who had long-standing relations with the Syrian Nationalists, promised Mardam Bey that he would give careful consideration to the project of Arab unity and that he would participate in a general Arab meeting whenever it convened.
Implementation of the Franco-Syrian agreement

On 1 January 1944 the French transferred the majority of the administrative powers to the Syrian and Lebanese governments. They retained the Sûreté Générale and the Troupes Spéciales, pending special accords to be drawn up between these governments and the Allied authorities in Syria, on the pretext that the war situation would not allow an immediate transfer. The Syrian government knew that the French would not give in voluntarily on these issues and decided to achieve its goal by exerting public pressure on them. Oliva-Roget reported to the Committee on 17 January that, during the whole week, an intensive propaganda campaign had been pursued in Syria for the creation of a national army. ‘All these movements are visibly orchestrated by the government,’ he commented. The Syrian government was in fact demonstrating to the French that it had the support of the people and was capable of stirring them up if need be. Catroux understood this and wrote to de Gaulle:

> It has not been possible to study the question of the [national] army which has been persistently raised in the street, in the press and in Parliament. I have considered it impossible to deliver a categorical refusal to the government as this might provoke an agitation for which we will have to pay the price in all domains. I have proposed to examine a theoretical transfer of the Troupes Spéciales to the governments, who would immediately place them under our command until the end of hostilities. Whatever your feelings on this affair, I repeat that such a transfer cannot be put off until the end of hostilities, at least with regard to Syria.\textsuperscript{19}

In a subsequent report Catroux wrote that although the ruling team of al-Quwatli, al-Jabri and Mardam Bey ‘show goodwill towards us’, they were dominated by a ‘shadowy nationalism’ and had every intention of proving to all concerned that their government was completely independent. That is why, he wrote, they were intransigent on all matters touching their national sovereignty, claiming in particular to be masters of the Sûreté and the armed forces. Catroux pointed out that the Syrian leaders were aware that, by adopting that attitude, they would come into conflict not only with the French, but also with the British military authorities. He again warned, however, that the Syrian demands should not be treated lightly, as a categorical refusal would be denounced as ‘the survival of the spirit of the Mandate and would unleash the usual means of pressure, such as strikes and street demonstrations’.

Catroux’s mission in Syria and Lebanon was coming to an end, and that report was his last message to the French Committee from Syria. He left shortly after for Algiers. At the time of his departure, Franco-Syrian
relations had greatly improved, but unfortunately this was not to last for long. By the beginning of 1944 the French National Committee had established itself with its Allies as the only valid French authority. The war had now turned in favour of the Allies, particularly in North Africa. Furthermore, de Gaulle’s relationship with Churchill had improved after their meeting at Marrakesh on 12 January 1944. This improved relationship is amply demonstrated by a note from Churchill to Spears, who had been consistently maligning the French:

I told you in Cairo that I do not wish to destroy French influence in Syria and the Lebanon and that our policy was to secure to them the same kind of position we had in Iraq. You are however going further than I wish and anyone can see you have become bitterly anti-French. Our relations with the French national Cte. are improving. The personal leadership of General de Gaulle is being merged in the Cte. In the process he has become more reasonable and my relations with him are much better than they were before we met in Marrakesh. You sd. be careful to avoid an anti-French policy in Syria... surtout pas trop de zèle.20

Not surprisingly, the French were to adopt a more intransigent attitude in Syria. The first indication of this came when, without consultation with the Syrian government, General Beynet was appointed Délégué Général au Levant and Commandant Supérieur des Troupes du Levant. The Syrians were informed of this appointment on 8 February 1944. They told Chataigneau that they were surprised by this information and had expected the French Committee to consult with them beforehand on the appointment of a new representative, and that such a representative would have the designation of a diplomatic envoy to conform with Syria’s sovereign status. In fact both the Syrian and Lebanese governments informed the French that they took strong exception to Beynet’s acting in the dual capacity of delegate-general and commander-in-chief. Ostrorog wrote to the French Committee that the affair was turning sour and that a serious mistake of a psychological order had been made. He warned that the days of the Mandate were over and expressed his surprise at the ‘bad humour’ of the French foreign department towards the governments of Syria and Lebanon.

It was during that period that three members of the French provisional assembly visited Syria and reported back to Algiers their disquiet over the appointment of Beynet as delegate-general and commander-in-chief. Following this report the commission of foreign affairs in the provisional consultative assembly unanimously asked the French government to delay the execution of this decision until the whole problem in the Levant had been re-examined. It feared that if the government went ahead despite the objections of the two states and contrary to the spirit of the recent accords that were signed by France, disturbances might occur. De Gaulle’s reply to the assembly was
negative. He said that, in the prevailing circumstances, a discussion of the situation in Syria and Lebanon by the assembly could have grave consequences and that his government did not believe that it was in the national interest to give in to foreign pressure and replace Beynet. Beynet had to go first. ‘We shall see about the rest,’ he said.

In reality de Gaulle was not as dismissive of the whole issue as appeared in his reply to the assembly. After careful consideration, he decided that the appointment of Beynet as delegate-general should stand, but that his position as commander-general of the French troops in the Levant should be kept secret. ‘This secret instruction will be relayed to the Command of the Forces to the exclusion of any other authority. It is a matter for General Beynet to reveal this designation to the Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Authorities, if he deems it expedient.’ These secret instructions in the French documents are signed by General de Gaulle himself.\footnote{21}

**General Beynet in Syria**

General Beynet left for Beirut during the first week of March and went to present his letters of credence to the Syrian president on 12 March. He also delivered a letter from General de Gaulle. This was written in very cordial and flattering language; it said that Beynet was appointed delegate-general and plenipotentiary of France and that, in the course of his mission, he would pursue with the Syrian government the negotiations started by General Catroux ‘with a view to fulfilling the promises that were made to the Syrian people, and to which the Committee remains unshakeably faithful’. The first meeting between President al-Quwatli and General Beynet went well, as expected.

Meanwhile, the Syrians were pressing Ostrorog and Chataigneau for a prompt solution to the question of the army and the Sûreté. These two issues had proved to be more difficult to solve than all others. The French as well as the British military commands did not envisage handing over the army and the security service to Syria. Although they were officially invoking the war as a reason, in reality they were hoping to use these issues as bargaining counters to acquire advantages in Syria. The French were quite open in this regard, but the British concealed their ambition from both the Syrians and the French. Whilst they were professing to the French that they had no interest in Syria beyond winning the war, they were examining the extent of their future presence in the area. At the end of 1943 the Committee on Palestine had been commissioned by the War Cabinet to report on Britain’s strategic needs in Syria, Lebanon, Transjordan and Palestine, both during the war and after the war. The report which was submitted in January 1944 concluded with this imperative:
The peace and security of Greater Syria is of the utmost importance to the British Empire and must be maintained. We should therefore do everything in our power to ensure the integrity of these States. The right to station adequate British forces and to control air and naval bases should be secured by treaties binding each State. The position of France, which legally is still entrusted with a mandate over these States, may require re-examination. Political considerations must not, however, be allowed to override our minimum requirements for defence.

Thus, it was in inauspicious circumstances that the Syrian government was negotiating with both the French and British military commands to obtain the army and the security services. During the month of February 1944, several proposals and counter-proposals were put forward by the Syrians and the Allied commands without much progress being achieved. Briefly, the French proposal envisaged the transfer of the Troupes Spéciales to the Syrian government in name only while ensuring continuance of French control and administration, including the provision of material and services – the expenses of which would be paid for by the Syrians in the form of cash and credit finance from the French Committee. The existing French cadre of officers would be maintained. The Syrian minister of defence would be designated as head of these troops, henceforth to be called the Syrian National Forces, and he would then place them under French command until the end of hostilities. Certain functions, such as recruitment and improvement of military efficiency, would be discharged by the minister but only in collaboration with the French commander-in-chief. A French military mission would be set up to give substance to such a collaboration which would continue to operate after the war.

The British accepted the French proposal, not only because in formal terms it complied with the Lyttelton–de Gaulle Agreement, which allocated the territorial command to the French, but more importantly, because in the final resort the territorial command was subordinated to the military command which was in British hands. This chain of command gave them the automatic right to ensure that their military requirements would be included in any final agreement with the Syrians.

The Syrian counter-proposals envisaged a more comprehensive transfer. All Troupes Spéciales, together with weapons, equipment depots, barracks and other military establishments, would pass to the Syrian national army under Syrian command and attached to the ministry of defence with the president of the republic as its commander-in-chief. The proposal conceded, however, that on account of the war and for the duration of the war, the Syrian government would accept the participation of its army in the defence of Syria in accordance with the plans established by the high command of the Allies and United
Nations in the Middle East. This formula was not at odds with the French proposal; the only difference was that the command would not be exclusively French, though in practice this would be passed on to the French anyway. As regards services and materials such as supply, administration, health services and communications, the counter-proposal said: 'In order to ensure the deployment of these troops in an independent manner, some services which are absolutely indispensable to this Army would have to be organised; this will have to be done in collaboration with the French and Allied Commanders in the Near East.' This was a sticky point since the French proposal and the British view required the retention of services and materials in exclusively French hands.

In purely practical terms, the French and Syrian positions were neither insurmountable nor intractable, but in terms of national prestige and principle, they were wide apart. The Syrians refused to be seen as recognising French territorial command, while the French refused to be seen as ceding it. Prevarication and delays seemed inevitable. The British tried to narrow the gap by revising and altering the wording of the French draft while keeping its substance intact. On 15 March 1944 a meeting was held between al-Quwatli, al-Jabri, Spears and the British army commander, General Holmes. For nine hours the French proposal was fully discussed. On some points of detail the Syrians showed willingness to compromise but on major points, especially those relating to the recognition of French territorial command, they did not give way.

Two days after that meeting, a clash occurred between the Troupes Spéciales under French command and Syrian police and civilians at a football match in Damascus. The clash resulted in the death of two soldiers and the injury of several others. Oliva-Roget contacted the Syrian government and both sides cooperated in calming the situation. In fact, feelings in Syria were running high over the whole question of a national army, and the mere presence of any member of the Troupes Spéciales was a provocation to the Syrian population. On 18 March demonstrations erupted in many Syrian towns and a general strike took place. The strike soon came to an end, thanks to the determined effort of the Syrian government, but the situation remained tense. In fact, disturbances broke out several times in the months following March 1944. On 20 April General Beynet issued a legislative decree on the formation of secret societies in Syria. The Syrian government immediately protested, insisting that the sovereignty of Syria be respected. Faced with mounting tension, the French authorities retreated, giving a solemn promise to the Syrian government that such ordinances of legislative character would ‘never again’ be contemplated. Trouble was contained – for the time being.
NOTES

1. MAE, vol. 1006, December 1943.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. FO 371/35190, 22 November 1943.
7. FO 371/35187, 16 November 1943.
8. Ibid.
9. FO 371/35189, 13 November 1943.
11. MAE, vol. 1006, 18 December 1943.
12. Ibid.
13. MAE, vol. 1006, 7 December 1943
14. Ibid., 7 December 1943.
15. Ibid., 8 December 1943.
17. Ibid., 25 December 1943.
20. Spears Papers, 10 February 1944.
22. FO 371/40300, 6 January 1944.
CHAPTER VII

Crisis in Syria's Relations with France and Britain

On 20 May 1944 a serious incident occurred which could have had dire consequences for the country had it not been rapidly contained by the Syrian prime minister. During the annual ball of a charitable society, the Goutte de Lait, which was established by the French to help orphans in Syria, religious groups led by Jamiyat al-Gharra seized the opportunity for disruptive action. They demonstrated against the participation of Syrian Muslim women in organising such an event. The demonstration soon turned into public disorder; women without veils were attacked in the streets; a women's conference held in a theatre hall was assailed with stones and bullets. Saadallah al-Jabri took immediate steps to control the situation: the leaders of the demonstration were rounded up and arrested and the Syrian police were given orders to fire at the troublemakers. Al-Jabri promptly issued the following communiqué: ‘The government has taken all possible measures to ensure order, the safety of individuals and property. The government is determined to meet all attempts at disrupting public order with the severest measures and will use force to disperse illegal gatherings.’ Al-Jabri followed up his action by going to parliament for a vote of confidence on the tough measures he had taken. He said that the national conscience would not permit these people to create divisions between the different communities and that the government had always defended religion, morals and virtue. ‘Religion had never been an instrument of vengeance. We will always safeguard the freedom of all religions,’ he added. The Chamber unanimously gave its full confidence to the government and full powers to deal with these incidents.

The civil disturbances of March and May prompted the Syrian government to speed up the delivery of weapons to the Syrian gendarmerie, but nothing came. Consequently, Mardam Bey asked the British consul to relay a message to the Allied command requesting it to provide the police with the necessary equipment. He asked the British not to oppose a similar request he would make to the Americans should they themselves be unable to provide the required material. Oliva-Roget immediately saw Mardam Bey and reported his interview to the French
National Committee as follows: 'In what concerns the demand to the British the minister [Mardam Bey] said: "We have asked for 1,000 rifles a month ago. You said yes. General Beynet himself said yes. You said 400 are on their way, then it was 200. Nothing has yet arrived. I will be frank with you and tell you that we have asked the British to furnish us with the arms and not to oppose our demand to the Americans if they are unable to do so themselves." I told Jamil Mardam that I will ask again for the prompt delivery of the promised arms.'

The other problem which was troubling the French concerned a draft law which the Syrian minister of education was hoping to introduce to parliament for approval. The project prepared by Sate al-Husri, the eminent Arab historian, called for the outright Arabisation of the educational programme in Syrian schools. Predictably, the French were perturbed since they attached great importance to their cultural presence. The ministry of education was pressing the government to enable the bill to be passed by parliament as soon as possible. Mardam Bey was personally opposed to any rash decision on this matter and expressed his view clearly in cabinet. Mardam Bey was not opposed in principle to the Arabisation of the educational system as such but to the suddenness of the change that might well have a detrimental effect on education. He believed that the time was not yet ripe for it, and that anyway the government had enough problems to contend with at that time without having to add to them by embarking on such a venture. He was also aware that the country did not have enough qualified personnel to cope with such a drastic change. Above all, he believed that reforms of this nature had to be introduced gradually to avoid causing a culture shock which might disrupt education. Beynet reported to the French Committee: 'Jamil bey is a very intelligent interlocutor and therefore a sincere partisan of conciliatory solutions. He has certainly intervened in our favour to prevent rushing through Parliament a draft law proposed by the Minister of Public Education.'

Negotiations over the Troupes Spéciales

Despite all the difficulties the Syrian government was having with the French, it made an effort to contain the situation so as to avert a crisis that might lead to a clash. Beynet was aware of this and wrote to the French Committee that it appeared to all concerned that the present government had proved to be up to its task, and that the prime minister had affirmed his authority during the events of May. Beynet warned that there was an opposition group in parliament that would like to provoke a crisis in the hope of taking power and that this group was 'in contact'
with agents ('more or less unofficial agents') of the British legation who wished to shake the position of the present ministers in order to recruit in Damascus 'leaders as docile as Camille Chamoun and Adel Osseiran in Beirut'. Beynet added that had there been in the Syrian government 'a creature like Camille Chamoun', the recent incidents in Damascus would have been exploited against France, but al-Jabri was of a different calibre - 'personal interest never intervenes in his decisions'.

Although Beynet knew that the Syrian government was trying hard to avert a crisis, the French authorities would still not respond in like manner in their negotiations over the transfer of the Troupes Spéciales and the Sûreté Générale. Beynet tried to delay the resumption of negotiations, but the Syrian government warned that the present state of public opinion was such that a revolution would almost certainly erupt if an agreement was not reached soon. On 15 June negotiations were resumed but hardly any progress was made. Thus thwarted, the Syrians swung the other way by threatening to break off negotiations altogether. Spears suggested that discussions be resumed on the basis of a formula allowing the transfer of the armed forces by stages. Talks were resumed on this basis and a provisional agreement was reached between the French and the Syrians whereby half the army would be transferred before the armistice and the other half on armistice day. However, Beynet did not sign it there and then; what the Syrians did not know was that Beynet had meanwhile received instructions from Massigli not to sign, as a meeting between the French and the British was due to be held in London to elicit British support for a Franco-Syrian treaty.

On 30 June Mardam Bey summoned Oliva-Roget and told him that he was passing on a message through him from the president and the prime minister to General Beynet requesting the general to sign the accords on the transfer of the army and the security services before his departure for Algiers. He further told him that while he knew that Beynet had said that he would have to refer back to Algiers before signing, he [Mardam Bey] would advise the French to settle this matter before Beynet's departure as the situation was fast becoming indefensible. He also informed him of his government's talks with the British military command and said that the Syrians had persuaded the British to delete all references to the retention of control of ammunitions and armaments by the Allied military command in the new proposals; it had also been agreed to drop the article concerning internments. Mardam Bey said: 'We told them [the British] clearly, that we will never accept that you can arrest and intern Syrians without our consent. I will be frank, if we cannot reach an agreement with you, we will create our own security services. We know what three security services means. The British will arrest all the francophiles; you will arrest all the
Crisis in Syria's Relations with France and Britain

anglophiles, and we will arrest all those who work for you and for the British. Everybody will go to prison.'

Mardam Bey said that if within 48 hours no agreement had been reached with the French, the Syrian government would create its own security services. On the question of the army, Mardam Bey told Oliva-Roget frankly that the reason why they were so insistent on finalising an accord immediately was that they had received information that a Franco-British agreement was soon to be concluded in London: 'We heard that accords are being made. But we have already sent a note to the British informing them that we protest in advance against any arrangement that will infringe upon our independence and that we will not recognise any settlement reached without our consent.'

Shortly afterwards, the Palestine Post published a report — quoting the American information agency — that the Syrian government had communicated an aide-mémoire to the British government regarding Syria's demands after the war. The report alleged that amongst these demands was one proposing conclusion of a treaty with Britain. Mardam Bey immediately held a press conference in which he categorically denied the allegation regarding a treaty with Britain and revealed that the aide-mémoire, submitted to both Britain and the United States, was concerned with Arab unity and the Palestine problem. This minor incident did not perturb the French unduly. Apart from a routine report by General Beynet to Massigli, nothing was mentioned by the French on this subject until several weeks later when it was dredged up and, as will be discussed later, used as justification for putting off signing the accord on the transfer of the army. Meanwhile the situation remained relatively normal. In fact soon after the meeting between Mardam Bey and Oliva-Roget, Chataigneau arrived in Damascus and reached a final accord with the Syrians over the transfer of the security services as part of the settlement of the Common Interests. Commenting on this accord, Beynet wrote: 'The conclusion has brought a provisional détente in a very tense atmosphere.'

Recognition of Syrian independence by China and the Soviet Union

The war in Europe had turned decisively in favour of the Allies and it seemed that it would not be long before a peace conference would be convened. The Syrians were therefore anxious to consolidate their independence by establishing diplomatic relations with all the Great Powers. Mardam Bey had contacted the Chinese ambassador in Iraq in
March and had requested China's recognition. In May the same Chinese ambassador visited Syria and informed its government of China's desire to establish diplomatic relations. In informal conversations with Mardam Bey about the international situation, the Chinese ambassador told him that in his opinion the Soviet Union was the only power which was fighting the war because of 'high ideals', in contrast to America and Britain. As for China, it was defending itself against aggression and conducting a war of national liberation against Japanese imperialism. Therefore the Soviet Union was the only power that could be trusted to honour any pledges it would make. He believed that the Soviet Union would help the Arabs to fulfil their demands, in particular Syria's, for it regarded de Gaulle as a dictator. He pointed out that the Soviet Communist Party had provided the Chinese national army with 20 fully equipped battalions, whereas the Americans had offered only a small quantity of ammunition for one battalion to last one week only. Mardam Bey found these views very interesting because he had already raised in the cabinet the question of contacting the Soviet ambassador to Egypt.

In June the Syrian government delegated Naim Antaki to make contact with the Soviet ambassador in Cairo on its behalf and on behalf of the Lebanese government. Antaki was chosen because the Syrian government wanted to keep the contact with the Soviets secret from the French and British; his visit to Egypt would in no way be considered as official, since his in-laws lived in Cairo and he visited them frequently. In Cairo Antaki met Ambassador Novikov and conveyed to him an invitation to visit Syria as soon as convenient to discuss the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and Syria and Lebanon respectively. Diplomatic relations would naturally be based on total and unconditional Soviet recognition of these countries' independence and sovereignty. During his talks with Antaki, Novikov expressed his government's 'firm wish to recognise Syria's independence'.

On 11 July Novikov went to Damascus as the guest of the Syrian government, but his presence was not disclosed and he was kept in the summer resort of Bloudan far from the capital. His first meeting with Jamil Mardam Bey took place on 12 July. After the meeting he despatched a telegram to his government recommending recognition of Syria's independence and the establishment of diplomatic relations. Mardam Bey also suggested to the Soviets that this recognition should be extended to Lebanon as well, recalling that Antaki had spoken for both governments. Novikov said that he would be pleased to do so if a member of the Lebanese government would discuss the matter with him. Mardam Bey contacted Salim Takla, the minister of foreign affairs, who proceeded immediately to Bloudan where he met Novikov with
Mardam Bey on 13 July. On the same day Novikov sent a telegram to his government requesting that the steps taken with respect to Syria be applied to Lebanon as well. On 21 July Mardam Bey sent a message to ‘Comrade’ Molotov, the Soviet foreign minister, in which he expressed Syria’s ‘admiration for the Soviet people, whose efforts and successes in the great struggle of democracy laid the foundations for the future freedoms and equality for all nations, great and small’. These nations, he said, were ‘encouraged by the foreign policy pursued by the Soviet Union, which from the beginning of its existence, had proclaimed the abolition of all privileges, capitulations and other priorities enjoyed by Czarist Russia.’ Mardam Bey went on to say: ‘Syria who only recently witnessed the solemn recognition of her international existence as an independent and sovereign State would be happy to maintain amicable diplomatic relations, were they to be established in the shortest possible time by the exchange of diplomatic missions.’ Molotov’s reply was immediate; on 23 July he wrote to Mardam Bey: ‘The Soviet government accepts with satisfaction the offer of the Syrian government concerning the establishment of friendly and diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and Syria.’

On 24 July the Syrian government gave an official banquet in honour of the Soviet delegation, and issued the following communiqué:

The recognition by the Soviet Union of the Syrian Republic as an independent and sovereign State is a full recognition, unvitiated by any reservation. Such recognition has great importance for Syria’s political life and has special significance because Syria is the second Arab state which the Soviet Union has recognised. Syria, which has never doubted the Soviet Union’s sympathy for small nations, is proud to be recognised by a great power that has had a decisive effect on the direction of the present war and will have the same effect on the recognition of the world after the war.

During the visit of the Soviet delegation to Syria and Lebanon, which lasted over two weeks, the Soviets did not contact the French authorities; it was only at the official banquets given by the governments that they had the occasion to meet. Count Ostrorog reported: ‘The reserve shown by Mr Novikoff was disobliging. It allowed the States to win the argument and strengthen their position. Novikoff passed two weeks in the Levant without contacting the Délégué Général of France. This is clearly not agreeable for us. The misfortune of the times does not allow us to complain.’ Novikov did finally invite General Beynet to the dinner he was giving in Beirut at the end of his stay, but Beynet informed him, through his secretary, that being the Délégué Général of France, he expected Novikov to pay him a visit first and that he would be pleased to receive
him to dinner at the French residence. Novikov replied, through his assistant, that he regretted he could not accept Beynet’s invitation and was sorry to hear that Beynet would not accept his. The Russians were plainly signalling to the French that they did not consider the French delegate to be other than a diplomatic representative and that they had no intention of dealing with him in any other capacity. This Russian attitude prompted Ostrorog to write in English: 'No complaints, no explanation.' The Syrians had scored a point: the Soviet presence was already emerging as a counterbalance to the French and British presence.

**Crisis over the 14 July celebrations**

During Novikov’s visit to Syria, a serious row broke out between Syria and the French authorities. On 14 July the French Delegation decided to hold military parades in both Damascus and Beirut in defiance of a specific demand from the Syrian and Lebanese governments not to do so. Both governments were outraged and asked the local representatives of the foreign powers to boycott the celebrations ‘that infringe upon the independence and sovereignty of the country’. In response, the diplomatic corps took the only sensible course and complied. The French authorities ignored Syrian and Lebanese protestations and went ahead organising festivities in all the major cities of Syria and Lebanon. The local governments then issued strict orders to all their officials forbidding them to attend these ceremonies. For some curious reason the French blamed Spears and the American representative George Wadsworth for the Syrian and Lebanese attitudes. In a report to the French Committee Oliva-Roget write: ‘Everyone is saying that the Syrian government is applying a line of conduct inspired by the British.’ By confusing the reason for the Syrian government’s reaction, the French authorities were deluding themselves. It did not seem to occur to them that a Syrian government led by the Nationalists could not do less than boycott the display of occupation forces on its own territory. Even Beynet, who had so far managed to control his emotions, wrote to the French Committee: ‘Everything is taking place as if to hasten events and to force our hand.’

On 17 July a note prepared by Mardam Bey was presented to Oliva-Roget. It listed the various actions taken deliberately by the French which disregarded the declaration of Syria’s independence as well as the Accords signed in December by Catroux. The note read: ‘On several occasions the Syrian government has discovered, in Damascus as well as in the provinces, particularly in the Mohafazats of the Euphrates, Jezira, Latakia and Aleppo, that the conduct of certain French officials
was in flagrant contradiction with the policy of independence... Those incidents were pointed out to the representatives of France who did not fail to recognise the legitimacy of our view.' The note went on to say that the commemoration of the 14 July took place 'without any consideration for national feelings. In fact, although the most formal promises were given to the government that the celebration of this anniversary will not infringe upon the sovereignty of Syria, military parades, spectacular cortèges and confessional demonstrations, tending to evoke a state of affairs that has been contractually abolished, were organised all over the territory of the country.' The note warned: 'The Syrian government considers that every act of infringement of the independence and sovereignty of Syria constitutes cause for disagreement for which it will not accept responsibility.' Mardam Bey concluded his note by underlining the fact that the Syrian government regarded the Délégation Générale as having a purely diplomatic and consular character and that consequently it had given instructions that all the 'legislative texts taken by the Délégation Générale since 22 December 1943 were null and void'.

Following the 14 July incidents, Franco-Syrian contacts for the transfer of the army came to a halt. The French were determined not to finalise the provisional accord, and it was becoming increasingly obvious to the Syrians that the French were not prepared to give up the army without securing a privileged position for themselves in Syria. On 24 July Mardam Bey called Oliva-Roget to his office and asked bluntly whether he had anything to say about the question of the army. Oliva-Roget's answer was that in view of the recent hostility shown by the Syrians, he had nothing to say about the army, and he proceeded to list all the complaints the French had against the attitude of the Syrian government and even accused the prime minister of duplicity. Oliva-Roget also made an innuendo that the French believed the British were behind the Syrian government's actions. The hint was not lost on Mardam Bey, who relayed to al-Jabri the conclusions he had arrived at following his interview with Oliva-Roget. That same evening at a reception, al-Jabri turned to Oliva-Roget and said: 'It is a pity that you cannot understand... Why don't you trust us? Why don't you wish to believe people like us, who, as you well know are xenophobes, myself, the President of the Republic... And do you believe that Jamil bey is anglophile?'

The line taken by the French over their unwillingness to transfer the army was becoming clear. The hints that the French were dropping were designed to convey the impression that their procrastination over the transfer of the army was not due to their own reluctance, but to their fear of being supplanted by the British. This amounted to an indirect accusation that the Syrian government had become a pawn of
the British. Although the French knew very well that such an accusation levelled against the Syrian leaders was hardly credible, it was none the less an expedient serving their immediate purpose, namely that of concealing from the Syrians their intention of holding on to the army. They were also playing for time in their quest to obtain the endorsement of the British government — with which they were shortly to have talks — of their intention to conclude a treaty with Syria.

The reports written by the French officials such as Beynet, Ostrorog and Oliva-Roget, which had so far shown good sense, suddenly took a sharp turn in the opposite direction. Perhaps the boycott of the 14 July by the Syrian and Lebanese governments made them conscious of how seriously both countries took their independence. For the first time in 24 years of military occupation, they realised that they would no longer be permitted to display their military presence without resistance. There is no indication in the available French documents of the time that new directives were issued by the French National Committee which would account for the changed mood of the local French representatives. It is therefore conceivable that by sending inflammatory reports about the Syrian government, the French military authorities in Syria were trying to incite the Committee to renege on its promise of full independence. Whatever their motive, the fact was that their feelings were running high against local resistance especially at that time when France's international stature was improving fast. One report labelled al-Jabri as having gone mad: "There is no doubt that Saadallah al-Jabri has gone mad... The Prime Minister does not know what to do to take revenge." Another by Beynet accused al-Jabri of lying: "He has again claimed that a promise was given by the French authorities to the Syrian government to refrain from all demonstrations which are contrary to independence, such as reviewing the troops, cortèges and holding consular Masses. This lie has allowed al-Jabri to add that, since the promise was not kept, there was bound to be a reaction in the press and in the attitude of the government. This attitude of the Syrians offers us the advantage of delaying the conversations that they expect over the army."6

In fact it was Beynet who was misleading the French Committee as was revealed by Oliva-Roget's report on his conversations with president al-Quwatli on 8 August on the subject of the 14 July celebrations. He wrote that when the president told him that things did not happen exactly as had been agreed the day before the anniversary, he did not confess to him that 'orders contrary to the arrangements that I had told Anouar Hatem about were given by Beirut'. He went on to say, 'About what happened that day in Damascus, I alone am responsible. We failed to keep our promises. A company of the Bataillon du Levant led by a military band paraded in the Street of
Salhia, while I had told Anouar Hatem that no soldiers would be seen in the streets of Damascus. Anouar Hatem was the secretary-general of the cabinet. At the same meeting President al-Quwatli tried to calm the situation and to dispel French fears of an Anglo-Syrian plot against them. He told Oliva-Roget that Syria was led by the best team in the country and that men like him, like Saadallah al-Jabri and Jamil Mardam Bey 'cannot even think of replacing the French by others'. He said: 'It would be treason, not against France, but against Syria. We will not be traitors before we die.' Despite these assurances, Oliva-Roget chose to believe an unnamed 'visitor' who informed him 'very clearly' that the French should beware 'those people', because they were totally sold to the British, and that the president was even more so than his ministers. Count Ostrorog, for his part, also reported to the French Committee of National Liberation that the French should have no more illusions because the Syrians 'se sont donnés aux Anglais'. The French authorities in Syria had decided, probably collectively, to incite the French Committee against the Nationalist government and that the best way to do this was to play the British card.7

Commenting on his meeting with the Syrian president, Oliva-Roget recommended a complete reversal of French policy towards Syria, going as far as to plot the fall of the government. He wrote:

In order to overthrow the government, the Chamber will attack it on its relations with us. It will be accused of not having been firm enough... of not having been able to deliver the army. This means that if the present team is voted out in the Chamber, those who will replace it will have to prove themselves more demanding and might perhaps be more disagreeable. But they will not enjoy the same prestige, the same political weight neither \textit{vis-à-vis} the Allies, nor in the country. Resistance to excessive claims will be much easier for us. The immediate substitutes will not last long. Their successors will even be less solidly placed. We will gain time and all we need is to gain time. The agitation in the street and in the country will lead to a mighty fall. The prestige of Saadallah bey and his friends will suffer even more. Perhaps, even, the President of the Republic might fall with his government... The position of the government is not solid and we can be led to believe that its duration depends on us. If we resume our contact, we will save it... This government must disappear. If it does not go of its own accord, the opposition that will be stimulated by our resistance to it will oust it.

Remarkably, Oliva-Roget's report was not dismissed as an aberration of a zealous colonel. On the contrary, his machinations, wild though they were, found favour with Beynet who promptly proceeded to recommend them to the French Committee. Beynet wrote on 8 August: 'I agree with Colonel Oliva-Roget on the conclusions of his note and on our interest not to give the present Syrian government any pledge.'8
Anglo-French understanding

On 30 July the Syrian government, sensing that the French procrastination over the question of the army was designed to gain time until an agreement could be forged with the British, asked the British representative in Syria, Gilbert MacKereth, to inform his government that the French were spreading rumours to the effect that the visit of Spears to London was in contemplation of a change of policy by the British government. Mardam Bey, who saw MacKereth in the presence of the Lebanese foreign minister, told him that if there were to be any change of policy without their acquiescence, they would not feel constrained to accept it, if it derogated in any way from the principle of eventual complete independence. The Syrians were alarmed at the spectre of an Anglo-French agreement. General Clayton, reporting on his interview with the Syrian president, quoted the latter as saying that he wished Jamil Mardam Bey to be on hand while the Anglo-French discussions on Syria were taking place. On 4 August MacKereth informed his French counterpart in Damascus of the Syrian position. It seemed all the more puzzling that, after receiving this information, the French authorities were still insisting that a secret Anglo-Syrian agreement had been struck.

On 16 August Beynet finally called on the Syrian president and raised the question of a Syrian secret agreement with Britain, basing his assertion on the report published in the *Palestine Post* on 3 July 1944. In his report on the meeting, Beynet wrote:

I reminded the President that the interference of the British in all domains makes us believe, as indicated in the *Palestine Post*, that an accord has been made between the Syrian government and the Spears Mission at our expense. The President assured me that there was nothing of the sort... He added that the transfer of the army will give him the right and the means to defend the independence of his country better. I told him that such a transfer would remove all possibility of defending this independence and that he could not fail to realise that our situation in the world, which is improving daily, gives us more authority than the Syrian government... I also told him that negotiations were taking place to define Anglo-French positions on the basis of our previous accords.9

Two days after the meeting between President al-Quwatli and Beynet, Oliva-Roget was summoned by Mardam Bey, who expressed his surprise that General Beynet should attach so much importance to a report in the *Palestine Post* without attaching the same importance to the denial issued by the Syrian government. Mardam Bey reasserted Syria’s determination not to commit itself before the convocation of the proposed peace conference that would be held after the war. He told
Oliva-Roget: 'We can go to the peace conference without being lumbered by any prior engagements. We are telling the Iraqis and the Egyptians that we are freer than them and we intend to remain so.' The position of the Syrian government was thus made absolutely clear to the French: that Syria had no intention of signing a treaty with any foreign power and that the recognition of its independence was not negotiable; that Syria was determined to take over the army and would follow that course to the end. It was up to the French to give way willingly or to precipitate an eventual clash.

The Syrians were hoping that the French would be wise enough to opt for the first alternative. However this was not to be, and the finalisation of the accord on the transfer of the army was left in suspense. The reason for the deadlock was becoming clear. The French were biding their time pending the outcome of talks with the British due to be held shortly in London. Mardam Bey, fearing another agreement 'à la Sykes-Picot', contacted the British consul in Damascus and told him 'that he had learned that Count Ostrorog and General Bapst had gone to London and that conversations were taking place there which must be of interest to them'. This being so, the Syrian government demanded to send a delegation as soon as possible to London. The British would not contemplate Syrian participation and replied that the talks with the French would be concerned with general matters of mutual interest. The Foreign Office added, however, that should questions relating to the Levant arise, the British government would aim 'to facilitate the resumption of discussions between the French and the States over matters such as the transfer of the troupes spéciales'.

The Anglo-French talks led by Anthony Eden and Massigli were held in London on 23 August. After expressing the familiar complaint against Spears and his Mission – for the most part rejected by the British – the French were able to obtain a British promise that they would try to exert pressure on the Syrians for the conclusion of a treaty in line with the Proclamation of Independence of 1941 and the Lyttelton-de Gaulle Agreements, where Britain admitted France's claim among all the European nations, to preferential rights in Syria. Spears, who attended these meetings, wrote a letter to Eden in which he pointed out that French assertions that the implementation of the agreement between Catroux and the Syrian government in December 1943 was 'made dependent on the conclusion of a treaty between the Levant States and France' was 'simply not true'. He added that 'neither in the document itself, nor in Catroux's negotiations of it, was any such condition attached.' He drew the attention of Eden 'to the extraordinary depth of feeling of both governments on the question of a treaty'. Spears recalled that President al-Quwati told him that he would 'rather cut his right
hand than sign' a treaty with the French. He warned Eden that it would be 'to nurse an illusion to believe that the States will sign one'. However, Eden and the Foreign Office did not accept Spears's views, probably because they had long suspected him of anti-French bias. Their suspicion was understandable, but what they did not realise perhaps was that Spears had apparently given up all hope of the British supplanting the French, especially after Churchill's relations with de Gaulle had improved considerably in early 1944. His concern was now confined to seeing the French out of Syria and Lebanon. Actually, for the first time in the three years of his Mission in Syria, Spears's reporting of Nationalist activities and feelings started to become accurate.10

The British found themselves in a dilemma over the policy they were to pursue in Syria. On the one hand, the imminent liberation of France and the return of de Gaulle to Paris prompted them to respect French feelings; on the other hand they were anxious not to antagonise Arab feelings in general by appearing too openly on the side of the French. They were thus in two minds about a policy for Syria. A Foreign Office document setting out the various policy considerations raised the following points: '(1) Our general anxiety to secure France as a firm friend and to restore her self-confidence and her position in international affairs. (2) Our desire, on account of our interests in Palestine and Iraq, not to be the only European power having special rights in Arab countries, and therefore the sole target for Arab nationalism.' At the same time the British desired to preserve the goodwill 'successfully built under great difficulties, of the Arab races' and 'to keep in general step with the Russians and Americans who have both recognised the independence of the Levant States without any qualification in favour of France'.11

Before Spears left for Syria, Eden handed him written instructions concerning the policy he was to carry out. It read:

In the first place and with the end of the war in view it is most important that our efforts should be used to the fullest possible extent to pave the way for an eventual agreement between the States and the French... You will therefore neglect no opportunity of impressing on the local governments that the conclusion of an agreement with France is in our view not only the best but perhaps the sole method of securing full and unchallenged independence. You should also do everything possible to promote the establishment of a practical modus vivendi which will pave the way for such treaties.

On his arrival in Syria, Spears spoke separately to President al-Quwatli and Prime Minister al-Jabri to pave the way for a fuller meeting. On 13 September he met them again with Mardam Bey. He employed all the tact he could muster in an effort to persuade the Syrian leaders of
the advantages of 'finalising their relations with the French by a treaty'. But according to a report by Spears to the Foreign Office, the interview was 'difficult and depressing'. He was told by the Syrians that the United States had officially informed them that it was on the point of recognising 'their complete independence and would not recognise any eminent position by the French'. The Soviet position was the same. Spears asked how Britain could reconcile its position with that of its Allies, adding that 'quite apart from this they had no intention whatever of signing a treaty with the French'. Saadallah al-Jabri bitterly attacked the British stance and told Spears that at the beginning of the war the Arabs were anti-British, that 'they were disliked in Egypt, hated in Iraq and loathed in the Levant' and that their position only improved during the war; but by pressing Syria to sign a treaty with France at that time, Britain would lose everything. Spears said of the Syrian leaders that 'they would take every measure open to them both at home and abroad to oppose a treaty. They would knock at every door and appeal in the name of the Atlantic Charter to all national leaders and governments. They spoke of sending telegrams to the King, President Roosevelt and Stalin.' They would even contact Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League in India. Spears ended his report by saying: 'No arguments of any kind made the least impression on them. I had not thought it possible that these men who are personal friends of mine would have expressed their views with such brutal frankness.'

Spears's report did not receive the attention it deserved by the Foreign Office, although he was not alone in conveying to his government Syria's resolve not to be held to France by a treaty. MacKereth for one was quite aware of this fact from reports reaching him from Damascus. Weld-Forester, the British consul in Damascus, had reported an interview with Saadallah al-Jabri in which the Syrian prime minister expressed his government's 'unshaken determination to obtain full independence' and its preparedness to 'passer outre' in order to get rid of the last vestiges of French control. The British authorities, however, simply attributed the Syrian attitude to Spears having 'put the fat in the fire', that he had led the British into a 'good deal of unnecessary trouble', that he was 'blundering on' and that, instead of 'slipping the British instructions into a general conversation', he had 'put on his top hat and asked for an interview'.

Clearly the officials at the Foreign Office who had helped draft Eden's instructions to Spears, rather than admit to having wrongly dismissed Spears's warning to Eden on 25 August, preferred to blame Spears for mishandling the situation. It was extraordinary that the idea of a total rejection by Syria of signing a treaty with France had not yet sunk into the minds of British officials. Even Sheikh Taj had not signed a treaty in 1941. The only worry that the Foreign Office had about its support for a
Syria's Quest for Independence

treaty was that this might create 'a fuss at the Arab Unity Conference' planned for 25 September 1944. A message was therefore sent to Spears saying, 'as Syrian and Lebanese feelings run so high', it would be preferable 'not to press the matter further at present'. The British 'did not wish this question to be an issue at Arab unity discussions'.

France’s new attitude

The French on the other hand, having secured British support for the conclusion of a treaty with Syria, wished to resume negotiations with the Syrian government, after an interval of three months. On 6 September Oliva-Roget asked to visit the prime minister, who was surprised by this request. As al-Jabri was not yet aware of an Anglo-French agreement, he assumed that Oliva-Roget’s visit was merely a desire on the part of the French to mend their relations with the Syrians. On greeting Oliva-Roget, al-Jabri said: 'We are seeing you after a long time. Has the black cat that passed between us gone?' Al-Jabri was simply trying to relieve the tension. According to the prime minister’s minutes, the meeting was cordial, but a number of awkward questions were raised, such as French suspicions of the Syrian involvement with the British and the question of arming the Syrian gendarmerie. Saadallah bey expressed his astonishment at the attitude of Beynet who had failed on two occasions to respond to Mardam Bey’s invitation and who, since his return from Algiers two months earlier, had not even bothered to pay ‘une visite protocolaire’ to the government. Al-Jabri pointed out to Oliva-Roget that it was precisely such an attitude on the part of the French that was encouraging British ‘interference’.

The French National Committee had by this time moved its headquarters to Paris after its liberation of the city and had established itself as the provisional government of France. Having returned to Paris, the French were therefore in no mood to give in on any issue affecting their position in Syria and Lebanon. It was even becoming clear that they wanted to go back on their promise of complete independence. After a meeting presided over by Catroux, Ostrorog came to Syria with instructions linking the question of the transfer of the Troupes Spéciales to the conclusion of a treaty ‘consecrating the independence of the States and fixing the special relations with France’. Beynet was also to inform the governments of these states that the British government had agreed to the conclusion of such a treaty. Thus the French were exploiting to the maximum, and to the embarrassment of the British, Britain’s acquiescence to French demands.

On 19 September Beynet and Ostrorog went to see al-Quwatli who
was accompanied by al-Jabri and Mardam Bey, to resume negotiations. Al-Quwatli opened the meeting by inquiring about the French intention regarding the transfer of the army, which Catroux had promised on 22 December 1943 as forming an integral part of their overall agreement. But Beynet rejected this assertion on the grounds that the agreement of 22 December contained a list of services to be transferred to the Syrian government and that that list was limited and did not mention the army. Beynet was distorting the facts underlying the agreement by deliberately ignoring the crucial fact that when the Syrian government had refused to receive the French Committee’s letter, General Catroux had, on his own initiative, withdrawn it instantly: this letter had thus become non-existent as far as the final agreement was concerned.

Beynet, however, went on to state forcefully that the independence of Syria was conditional on its formalisation by a treaty, and that the talks held recently in London had realised ‘une parfaite entente’ between the French and British governments. Beynet added that it was in this framework that it would be possible to pursue negotiations. He again recalled that the French had received information about the conclusion of a treaty between Syria and Great Britain. When pressed about the source of his information, Beynet cited yet again the Palestine Post. President al-Quwatli reiterated the point that since the Syrians had never accepted the Mandate, there was no need ‘to put a juridical end to it’. He emphasised his government’s determination not to enter into any engagements along the lines of the Anglo-Iraqi treaty which gave a foreign power certain privileges, and that Syria ‘was resolutely hostile to the conclusion of a treaty of this nature with France’. In conclusion, the president insisted that a prompt answer be given to him by the French over the transfer of the army, before the Chamber was due to reassemble. Beynet said that he had to inform Paris of this demand before giving a reply.

**Britain’s dilemma**

That same day, Mardam Bey told Spears quite bluntly at a reception held at the presidency that he would invite the American, Soviet, Iraqi and Egyptian ministers, together with Spears and Beynet, to reveal what Spears and Beynet had told the Syrians on behalf of their respective governments; that he would also reveal Syria’s reply, namely that Syria was not prepared to conclude a treaty with any one power or to accord a special position to any one power but that it was prepared to negotiate ‘multilateral treaties’. Needless to say, this unnerved Spears who immediately sought an interview with the president to try to stop Mardam Bey from taking such action. Recourse to the president was a
manoeuvre that Spears employed every time the attitude of the government displeased him. But he always failed, because President al-
Quwatli was a constitutionally elected president, not a dictator who
gave orders to his government. More importantly, the president was in
full agreement with his government’s foreign policy.

Mardam Bey followed up his threat by sending telegrams to Eden,
Cordell Hull, the United States secretary of state, and to Molotov. At the
same time, President al-Quwatli sent similar messages to Churchill,
Roosevelt and Stalin. Mardam Bey’s telegram read:

The British Minister and the French Representative in Syria have
suggested that the Syrian government enter into negotiations with the
French for a treaty under which France should obtain a privileged
position in Syria. This suggestion is contrary to the high principles
proclaimed in the United Nations Atlantic Charter. The Syrian government
has firmly refused to consider this suggestion. The Syrian government
considers the Mandate to have been terminated both *de jure* and *de facto*
since the establishment in Syria of liberal, democratic and independent
institutions and also since the recognition by Great Britain, the Soviet
Union and the United States and other countries of Syria’s independence.

Al-Quwatli’s messages were along similar lines with this added
emphasis: ‘Syria has been liberated during this war from the chains of
secret agreements which it was made to endure in the name of the
Mandate.’ Al-Quwatli reaffirmed that ‘Syria intended to treat all nations
especially the Great Powers on a completely equal footing.’ To
Roosevelt the message included the following passage:

You will be surprised to learn Mr President that the British Minister has
made a verbal communication the tenor of which is to invite this
government to enter into negotiations with France for a treaty... The
high principles of freedom and liberty are being put to the test... We
trust that the world will not again be deceived by the secret and private
agreements made before the war. We also trust that the United States will
not again remain isolated from the affairs of the old world but will rather
help to uphold justice and will aid the weak nations, for peace cannot be
placed on a permanent basis if colonialist and expansionist ambitions are
not eliminated.

The message to Marshal Stalin concluded with this statement: ‘Placing
its trust in the democratic nations, especially the Soviet Union, which
was first to reveal the secret agreements after its Revolution of 1917,
and which refused to recognise the mandates resulting from those
secret agreements, Syria declines to make any exclusive agreement with
any state whatsoever.’

The British dilemma was growing, especially after al-Quwatli’s
messages to Stalin and Roosevelt effectively accusing Britain of having
concluded a secret agreement with France behind everyone’s back. The French, for their part, were not making matters easier for the British. In their talks with the Syrians, they emphasised the fact that they had the full support of Britain for their demands. The day after the Syrian messages were despatched to the Great Powers, al-Jabri and Mardam Bey left for Egypt to attend the conference for Arab unity. No assurances were given to the British that the question of their support for the French would not be raised at the conference. The British were therefore trying desperately to preserve their position in the Arab world as well as *vis-à-vis* their principal Allies, the United States and the Soviet Union, without endangering their relations with the French. It was an impossible task. Spears was instructed to allay Syrian fears by putting forward arguments in favour of a treaty without appearing to be exerting any pressure. On the other hand, the Syrians were adamant: no argument would make them change their mind, especially as they had by then acquired the unconditional recognition of their independence by the two major powers, the United States and the Soviet Union. Both Spears and Lord Moyne, who was then the British minister resident in Cairo, advised the Foreign Office to adopt a different line. Moyne wrote: ‘In view of the present surge of Arab nationalism it would be very damaging to our reputation if the Syrian Prime Minister could show that we were in fact attempting to impose exclusive treaties for the benefit of the French. It is therefore to our interest to avoid being further involved in this quarrel.’

Spears advised Eden that since it had become his ‘wish that the matter should not be pressed at present’, he should tell the French that the British had done their ‘best’ but that the Syrians were unmoved and that therefore ‘the French would be well advised not to press the matter at present, but to conclude negotiations for the transfer of the Troupes Spéciales which will enable a *modus vivendi*’. Spears added that he was ‘particularly apprehensive of possible repercussions’ when the Syrian parliament reassembled at the beginning of October: ‘It is highly probable that there will be trouble,’ Spears concluded.

But Eden had made up his mind to support the French and was not to be swayed. He commented on Spears’s message: ‘If Syrians are behaving so badly, I see no reason to press French on Troupes Spéciales.’ Ernest Bevin, who was then minister of labour in the British cabinet, warned Eden in a letter which read:

> I have been following with very close attention the telegrams that are passing about the Levant. I am aware that while we have agreed to independence, it was always recognised that the French had a special interest. But it does seem to me now that we are in danger of creating a situation similar to that at the end of last war. Having made use of these people during the war we are now deserting them and forcing them to
accept the French...Could not the whole situation be reviewed? It appears to me that we are trying to put the clock back to 1919.

Eden, who was personally responsible for this whole affair, tried to extricate himself from blame by placing it squarely on Spears. In his reply to Bevin he wrote that he was sorry to say that Spears seemed 'to have gone about his work so brusquely and with such suddenness, that instead of this appearing as the result of the continuous development of British policy, he had given to the States the impression that this is the result of a private agreement between us and the French to their detriment'.

Churchill for his part was beginning to question the wisdom of British involvement in support of the French. In a note to Eden which followed Bevin's, he wrote:

According to my recollection, we never promised to secure the French a privileged position in Syria and Lebanon. What we did promise was that we would in no way seek to supplant them. We said that if special privileges were given to any European power we should be content that the French should have them. This in no way committed us to strive for them. The situation has now been profoundly affected by the fact that the USSR and the USA have ignored any question of French privilege. It is evident that our attempts to make a special treaty for the French have failed, and if persisted in, may lead us into very great difficulties.16

While in Egypt, Saadallah al-Jabri and Jamil Mardam Bey met Lord Moyne, who assured them that there 'was no question whatever' of any British attempt 'to impose any treaty', as the Syrian prime minister had alleged, nor any grounds 'for reference to secret agreements', as the Syrian president had suggested in his message to President Roosevelt. Moyne wrote to the Foreign Office that this was his first meeting with the Syrians and that he was 'impressed by their hard and unyielding attitude'. At the meeting al-Jabri raised the question of rearming the gendarmerie, which the British had promised earlier in June, but had not yet done. According to Moyne, al-Jabri asked him what the British attitude would be if, in the event of the Syrians not getting the arms they required, 'they were to apply to the United States or (a gesture from which I understood he meant the Russians)'. To this Moyne hastened to reply that the principle of rearmament of the gendarmerie was never in dispute.17

Immediately after his return to Damascus from Egypt, Mardam Bey saw General Paget, the commander-in-chief of the British Forces in the Middle East, and asked him to speed up the delivery of arms to the gendarmerie. Paget then asked Mardam Bey whether the Syrian government would give its authority for some units of the British forces to remain in Syria for training purposes, to which Mardam Bey replied
that his government had no objections, but he asked: 'Would not the French interpret this as meaning that the British army was supplanting the French?' Mardam Bey also asked Paget whether the information the Syrians had about the French wishing to retain command of the Syrian army was true. Paget replied that this was not possible, but that nothing had been decided yet. The meeting between Mardam Bey and Paget reassured the Syrians that the British military would not make any problems. This could not be said of the British government, however. Neither Churchill's nor Eden's reply to the messages from al-Quwatli and Mardam Bey to them was promising.

On 4 October Spears went to see the Syrian president to give him an oral message from the British prime minister. This was that if the Syrian government allowed disturbances to occur as a method of applying pressure on the French to hand over the Troupes Spéciales, this would be regarded in London with grave concern. Al-Quwatli, who was expecting to hear Churchill's reply to his letter of 22 September, was very surprised to note that Churchill was referring to a different issue altogether, namely the possibility of trouble breaking out in Syria if, at the reopening of the Syrian parliament in October, the Syrian government was to announce that no settlement had been reached over the transfer of the army. But since the subject was brought up, al-Quwatli answered that if he was 'expected to promise' to do his best to calm feelings in parliament, he would expect the British prime minister to see that the army was transferred to Syria in fulfilment of the Proclamation of Independence of 1941, endorsed by Britain, and of the Franco-Syrian Agreement of 22 December 1943.

Not only was al-Quwatli surprised at Churchill's angry reaction to what he called 'threat of blackmail' by the Syrians, but also Spears himself was surprised to receive a telegram from Churchill instructing him to deliver a warning, albeit disguised, to the Syrian president. Spears had indeed warned his government repeatedly that feelings were running high in Syria over the lack of progress on the question of the army, and that the possibility of trouble following the reassembly of parliament was real indeed, but at no point had Spears mentioned that the Syrian leadership had been making threats to that effect. In his response to Churchill, Spears said: 'I am bewildered by this change of policy. We pressed the French to transfer Troupes Spéciales stating failure to do so must inevitably increase the tension and endanger security, yet we are now apparently willing to support them in using this question as a means of bringing pressure on the Syrians for a treaty. Were it not for your telegram I would have felt it would do more harm than good to intervene further with the Syrians.' As for the Syrians' threat of blackmail, Spears said that he was 'at a loss to understand in what way the Syrians could be accused of blackmail. The question of
the Troupes Spéciales would be raised vehemently from all sides in Parliament and that the government must meet the House.' There had been no question of blackmail, 'only facts'. A possible explanation for this angry message from Churchill may have been that Eden, realising that Churchill had misgivings about his (Eden's) support for the French, may have tried to defend his policy by citing Spears's personal apprehensions as emanating directly from the Syrian government. Spears was equally disturbed by the contents of a letter Eden had sent him to deliver to Mardam Bey. A copy of this letter was sent to Lord Moyne in Cairo. Both Spears and Moyne contested the arguments in Eden's letter, and since Mardam Bey was then in Egypt and not available for immediate communication, they sought to get Eden to modify it. But Eden had already sent the text of his letter to the British ambassadors in Moscow, Paris and Washington, with instructions to communicate it to the governments of the Soviet Union, France and the United States respectively.18

Eden's letter to Mardam Bey, which was only delivered to him on 16 October, based itself on the argument that the conclusion of a treaty between Syria and France was 'necessary and inevitable' in order to 'define relations' between a 'mandated territory' and the 'mandatory state'. Eden explained:

Owing to the war situation there has not since 1941 been in existence a French government which was able to make a treaty on behalf of France... Now that France is liberated, the situation will soon be altered and HM's Government would be glad to see the final formal realisation of the independence of the Levant States... The French in the Levant still possess (by virtue of the Mandate, and legally speaking) various rights and functions in some of which the British authorities cooperate or are associated with for war reasons... There are various questions which will seem to need clearing up and which can only be settled in a treaty.

Eden concluded by saying that his government had admitted 'a predominant position for France' and that this arrangement provided 'fully for Syrian independence and is in no sense contrary to the Atlantic Charter'. He also mentioned that there were 'no secret agreements about the Levant States as hinted in the letter to Mr Churchill'.

Mardam Bey's absence from Damascus provided both Spears and Moyne with the opportunity to comment on Eden's message before it was delivered. Spears was not hopeful of the text being amended since 'this message had already been communicated to the French and that there can be no question of modifying the text'. Nevertheless, Spears warned Eden that Mardam Bey would fiercely contest any reference to the Mandate: 'I rate as most unfortunate that this parenthesis reference ["by virtue of the mandate, and legally speaking"] should have been
made.' Spears pointed out to Eden that his reference to 'various
questions' which, he said, still needed clearing up, concerned only the
Troupes Spéciales. He added that Eden's statement, which referred to
the British government wishing to see 'the final and formal realisation of
independence of the Levant States', had been questioned by Wadsworth
who had asked him: 'In what way did HM's Government consider they
were not already finally and formally independent?'

Moyne's comments on Eden's message were on the same lines as
Spears's:

Syrian Ministers are keen controversialists and it is important to put our
case on unassailable grounds. They are expected to challenge reference
to termination of mandate being conditional on conclusion of a treaty,
the suggestion that independence was only promised in 1941 and not
finally established. Ministers know to the last detail what happened in the
case of Iraq and we are aware that independence there depended on
admission to League of Nations and not on subsequent treaty.

Eden also sent a telegram to Spears following the dispatch of his
message to Mardam Bey in which he said: 'You should stop pressing
French to transfer Troupes Spéciales for the moment. It is obvious they
will only do this as part of treaty negotiations, and as Syrian attitude is
so stiff, it may be a very useful card to bring about agreement which we
wish to see.' Both Spears and Moyne protested over this change of
policy. Moyne wrote to Eden: 'There has previously never been any
suggestion that transfer of Troupes Spéciales should be allowed to be a
bargaining counter in negotiations for a treaty.' Spears also remarked on
the sudden shift in policy. He wrote to Eden: 'In your reply to Massigli
on August 26th you said that you hoped that future of Troupes
Spéciales would be subject to early agreement. You now advocate that
these troops which you have hitherto held to be right and urgent
should be transferred to the States should be retained by the French as
a bargaining counter to obtain a treaty.'

Eden was not swayed by any of these arguments and insisted that his
message be transmitted to the Syrian government as it stood. But he
had to make a concession when Churchill asked him to make clear that
the British were 'not responsible for procuring a position of privilege or
predominance in Syria' and that the French had no right to claim British
'support for their privileged position'. In his note to Eden, Churchill
added that he was anxious to find out whether he and Eden were 'in
agreement on this point'. On receipt of Churchill's note, Eden wrote to
Spears instructing him to convey an oral message to Mardam Bey when
delivering the written message. The oral message was as follows: 'His
Majesty's Government are not seeking to impose any particular
procedure or conditions on the Syrian Government but it would be a
pity if the Syrians were to miss the present favourable opportunity to put their relations with the French on a final and stable basis.' Eden’s reply to Churchill agreed that the British ‘were not under obligation to procure for the French a privileged position in Syria’ and admitted that this point was ‘not emphasised’ in his written message. He had not done so, however, because it was ‘undesirable to emphasise the point too strongly to Spears. Because of his well-known bias he would inevitably seize upon it and we should be justly accused by the French that we had made their position very much more difficult.’

Eden’s insensitivity to the nationalist sentiments of small countries was apparent in many of his pronouncements. Speaking to Moyne, for instance, he asserted that the French had ‘every right to occupy the Levant States’ and compared French claims in Syria with Britain’s in Egypt. When he was told that the French were hated in that country, he replied that there was just the same dislike for the British in Egypt where, however, the British ‘had every intention of staying’. Eden’s telegram to Spears instructing him to stop pressing the French to transfer the Troupes Spéciales finally convinced Spears that there was no hope of Eden ever accepting any other argument but his own and replied in despair: ‘I do not wish to engage in a profitless argument. As however, the arguments which I have developed in previous telegrams have failed to convince you I will of course proceed to act upon the instructions which you have given to me.’

Eden’s stubborn attitude in the face of constructive criticism by men like Churchill, Bevin and Moyne, clearly indicated that he had no qualms about appearing to go back on promises made to Syria, with all the repercussions that this could have in the Arab world, but was worried about a commitment he had made personally to Massigli. It seemed that, to Eden, Syria was after all a small country, whose example might be followed by other small nations to the detriment of imperial interests, whereas France was, above all, a member of the European club.

NOTES

1. MAE, vol. 1004, 7 June 1944.
2. Ibid., 14 June 1944.
6. MAE, vol. 1002, 8 August 1944.
7. MAE, vol. 1003, 6 August 1944.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 18 August 1944.
10. Spears Papers, 28 August 1944.
11. FO 371/4036, 8 November 1944.
12. FO 371/40304, 1 September 1944.
13. FO 371/40302, 14 September 1944.
15. FO 371/40304, 26 September 1944.
16. Ibid.
17. FO 371/40303, 27 September 1944.
18. FO 371/40304, 29 September 1944.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
Spears quite unexpectedly had a few days’ respite because of a change of government taking place in Syria. On 12 October the prime minister, Saadallah al-Jabri, addressed the Syrian parliament upon his return from the Arab Unity Conference. He began his speech by listing the achievements of his government since its formation in August 1943. He said that any restrictions on Syrian independence were due to the condition of war and stressed that in ‘these troubled times internal affairs came second to the one policy that counts: and that is foreign policy’. He emphasised that Syria was determined to obtain all its administrative powers and ‘make the foreigner recognise this right’. He added: ‘We have been able to realise a large proportion of our aspirations, and there remains between us and the French only the one thing, and that has already been decided and finalised, and there should be no reason for further debate or discussion, that is the army.’ He then revealed to parliament the stages of the negotiations that took place between his government and the French over the army and stated: ‘While we were waiting to take over the army, we received a demand from the French to conclude a treaty by which France would secure a pre-eminent position over all other countries.’ He added that his government would not even consider such a demand.

Al-Jabri then referred to the Arab Unity Conference and the Alexandria Protocol which he and Mardam Bey signed on behalf of Syria and said that the Syrian Nationalists were not interested in mere appearances of unity but stood for total centralisation and made their stand clear to the Conference. He added that if the final resolution did not come up to the expectations of the Syrian delegation, it was because ‘every country may have its special reasons and we must be tolerant and go along with them’, but that there ‘were general principles’ in respect of which Syria reserved its rights. These principles, he said, related to an Arab unity which must be attained, and to Syrian unification, which Syria earnestly desired. On the latter point al-Jabri said: ‘We refuse to have Palestine cut off from us and we have preserved the republican form of government with Damascus as its
capital.' Al-Jabri concluded his speech by announcing that he would surprise the Chamber, his cabinet and the president by tendering his resignation. It was, in fact, a surprise as there was no reason for him to take such a step. Only Mardam Bey knew of his decision beforehand. Mardam Bey had tried all he could to dissuade him, but to no avail. Al-Jabri had told him privately that he had felt that the president wanted a change of government in order to persuade the French to resume negotiations over the transfer of the army. Mardam Bey in particular was profoundly disturbed, since there was no question in his mind that any advantage would be gained by his leaving the foreign affairs for the premiership at this juncture. His partnership with al-Jabri since the formation of the National Bloc had been most fruitful for the country.

The change of government was more a reshuffle than a fundamental change. Fares al-Khouri was given the premiership and al-Jabri was elected president of the Chamber. The composition of the cabinet remained almost unchanged except for Mardam Bey taking over the ministry of defence and the ministry of national economy alongside the ministry of foreign affairs. This meant that all aspects of the negotiations with France were centred around him. The new government was formed on 14 October 1944.

On 16 October Spears went to see Mardam Bey to hand him Eden's message of 1 October. Mardam Bey made no comment on the written communication and told Spears that it would be studied carefully and answered in due course. As for the oral message, Mardam Bey requested clarification of the statement that 'it would be a pity if the Syrians were to miss the present favourable opportunity'. He asked whether this meant that, when the British forces withdrew, there could be a risk of the French bringing in troops to impose a treaty by force, or whether it meant that a country with the power to do so was at liberty to send troops to the territory of a small country against its will.

On the same day President al-Quwatli asked Spears to relay an oral message to Churchill to the effect that he had managed 'in the face of great difficulty to induce the Chamber not to press the question of the army', but in view of the publication of a French statement that the French cabinet had rejected the demand for the transfer of the Troupes Spéciales, it would be impossible to attempt to calm opinion any longer.

United States and Soviet support for Syria's position

At the same time as Spears delivered Eden's message, Mardam Bey received Cordell Hull's reply as follows: 'The Government of the United
States considers the question of possible negotiations of treaties between Syria and other powers as one for determination by the Syrian Government within the limits of the international obligations and responsibilities incumbent upon it.' The American secretary of state added that 'The United States would not desire to influence the Syrian Government's decision in this respect, though it would naturally have no reason to object to the conclusion of accords if such were freely and voluntarily agreed to between interested parties.' The Americans were clearly not interested in endorsing the British position, despite the various démarches made by Lord Halifax, the British ambassador in Washington.

When submitting Hull's letter, Wadsworth also handed Mardam Bey a copy of the American memorandum to the French in reply to a French request made in September 1944 for US recognition of Syria's independence 'according to the terms' of Catroux's Proclamation of Independence. The American memorandum stated that the United States government was unable to 'accede' to this request and recalled that when the French had asked the Americans in 1941 to recognise Syria's independence, they refused to do so, because Syria was then considered a 'semi-independent State'. The memorandum went on to say that the United States government having followed developments in Syria and Lebanon with careful attention, welcomed the accords concluded with Catroux in December 1943 and that consequently the United States considered Syria and Lebanon to be 'effectively independent'. It explained that, in the United States' view, the 'war powers exercised by the French and British... could not be considered inconsistent with or derogatory to the independence of the States, since these powers have been freely and willingly granted and have been confirmed by the local governments'. The Americans reminded the French that they had previously informed them 'that no useful purpose would be served by academic discussion of... legal technicalities' concerning the Mandate. The note concluded by stating emphatically that the United States 'could not agree that France or French nationals should enjoy discriminatory privileges in independent Syria and Lebanon'.

The attitude of the United States was thus clearly and unequivocally defined to the French and the British. It was an attitude that endorsed fully the Syrian position. The United States went further than any other power in considering the independence of Syria as finally established by the agreements between Syria and Catroux in December 1943. Roosevelt's reply to President al-Quwatli was not sent until December 1944. In it Roosevelt told al-Quwatli that although he had not been able to reply immediately, the several communications which had recently been made to Mardam Bey by Wadsworth 'have constituted a response
intended to define the attitude of the United States government. He added: 'I refer particularly in this regard to the State Department's memorandum of 5 October, 1944 to the French... I believe these documents speak for themselves and I have been glad to hear from Mr Wadsworth that you have found them reassuring.' In response to the point made by the Syrian president in his letter to Roosevelt that Syria hoped that the United States would not again become isolated after the war, Roosevelt wrote: 'The American people have recently recorded overwhelmingly by their determination that the United States shall assume its full share of the responsibilities, in cooperation with the nations of like mind, in creating a future world of peace, prosperity and justice for all. I therefore have no hesitation in assuring you that my Government will pursue these objectives with all the influence at its command.'

On 26 October the newly appointed Soviet minister, Solod, presented his letters of credence to the Syrian president and gave him a verbal message from Stalin in response to al-Quwatli's letter of 22 September. The Soviet minister said that Stalin reaffirmed the statements made by Novikov in July, namely that the Soviet Union wished to see Syria completely independent with no foreign power enjoying a privileged position. Thus the Syrians were unequivocally assured of both the United States' and the Soviet Union's support in refusing to grant France a pre-eminent position. There was now no reason for the Syrians to give in to either French or British pressure over the conclusion of a treaty. But they had to pursue their talks with the French for the transfer of the army which had by then become a major national issue. At the same time they feared that the French authorities, having re-established themselves in France, might use military force to obtain what they considered to be their undisputed right.

It was with this in mind that the Syrians inquired from Spears what the British reaction would be in such an eventuality. Mardam Bey told Spears that the British could not expect order to be maintained if they were not prepared to help solve that problem. Spears replied that he did not have the 'faintest idea' about British reaction, but would inform his government. In fact Lord Moyne, after seeing General Paget in Cairo, had thought of this possibility and had presented a note to Churchill for discussion at a conference on the Middle East. This was held in Cairo on 20 October and attended by Churchill, Eden, Moyne and the chiefs of staff. Referring to Mardam Bey's inquiry of 17 October, Moyne said: 'In the absence of agreement between the French and the States, the arrival of further French forces would probably cause a clash with disastrous complications both locally and to our position in the Arab world if we were not to intervene.' Lord Moyne suggested that the commander-in-chief be authorised to forbid the landing of French
troops on grounds of security. Lord Moyne put the question: 'Will His Majesty's Government support such refusal vis-à-vis Paris Government?' Churchill replied:

The answers to Lord Moyne's questions were clear. It seemed unlikely that any French ship would attempt to gate-crash the Lebanese ports. All ships arriving at a port had to seek permission to enter... They would be told that they must not land troops and that the matter was being referred to the Commander-in-Chief, who in his turn would refer the matter to London... The Commander-in-Chief should certainly have discretion to refuse requests by the French to send more troops to Syria for any purpose on grounds of security.

Churchill took his decision on Lord Moyne's advice in spite of the legal arguments put forward by Eden and the Foreign Office. Churchill had the support of the British military command in the Middle East on this question.²

Resumption of Franco-Syrian talks

On 24 October, the Syrians and French resumed their talks officially after several months of French silence. The talks were held in the foreign ministry in Damascus. The minutes, as recorded in the Mardam Bey papers in French, demonstrate how far apart French and Syrian thinking and perceptions were. The wide gulf between them is reflected in the convoluted dialogue between them and may go a long way to explain why future events took the unhappy course they did. The Franco-Syrian talks took place over a period of six days between 24 and 30 October 1944.

The minutes of the Franco-Syrian talks in October 1944 are hereunder reproduced exactly.

The Franco-Syrian talks were resumed today at 11.30 a.m. at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Those taking part on the Syrian side were: Their Excellencies Fares bey al-Kbouri, Prime Minister; Jamil Mardam Bey, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Defence and National Economy. On the French side were: Their Excellencies General Beynet, Délégué Général of France; Count Ostorog, Minister of France; Colonel Oliva-Roget, Délégué in Damascus.

His Excellency, Jamil Mardam Bey opened the session by congratulating General Beynet on the recognition of the French Provisional Government by the Allied Powers. Very touched, General Beynet thanked the Minister of Foreign Affairs and declared that he will transmit these congratulations to his government. In his turn, he
congratulated the new government and paid tribute to the eminent qualities, shown by His Excellency Fares bey during his Presidency of the Chamber.

Jamil bey: There are certain problems that have to be solved between us, and I am authorised to speak on behalf of the Lebanese government. Our task, as men of goodwill, is to solve them. We now have a new government, though with the same Foreign Minister. I have already had the opportunity to view the unresolved problems with the President of the Republic. By virtue of the Accord of 22 December 1943, all services previously held by France have passed to the Syrian government, except the army. A project for an accord was drafted in this regard. Circumstances, whether attenuating or aggravating, I do not know, have delayed the ratification of this draft accord. Then, before our departure to Cairo, there was this British démarche as well as yours, concerning a treaty. The question of the army has not been solved. Today in an atmosphere of perfect cordiality we are resuming our talks. We wish to succeed, not in the interest of one party, but in the interest of both parties. I would like first to assure you that though we are deeply attached to our independence, we do not harbour any hostile feelings towards France.

General Beynet: By virtue of the Accord concluded with General Catroux, we have transferred to the Syrian government all the powers that we held. When General Catroux negotiated with you, he had specifically stated that he would wish with all his heart to yield all the powers; but at the same time he wanted to define our mutual relations in a treaty. I had an interview on this subject with the President of Lebanon. His Excellency Beshara al-Khoury, when the question of a treaty between us arose, told me that Lebanon did not wish to undertake any international engagements until the end of the war. Eight days later, the Alexandria Protocol was signed.

Jamil bey: The Accord of 22 December comprises the transfer of the army. This question is independent of the Alexandria Protocol. A project for the transfer of the army was concluded. The reason for your hesitations, as I understand it, stems from your lack of confidence in the British who maintain forces in Syria. It was the only reason you invoked. Now this situation no longer exists. From the British, you have the firmest and most solid assurances. Therefore you have no reason to hesitate. The army is for us the symbol of independence and sovereignty. We will never use it against France or the Allies. We will keep the French officers. Since you have undertaken to transfer the army, it is better to do it now.

Count Ostrorog underlined to Fares bey that the Accord of 22 December does not comprise the transfer of the army, but only the services of the
Common Interests. It was a month later that at the request of Saadallah bey, General Catroux discussed this question. Monsieur Ostrowg added: 'I am not giving these particulars as a sign of refusal on our part to discuss the army. We are ready to resume talks. The army did not figure on the list of services to be transferred to the government, as prepared by General Catroux, but once again, we can broach this question.'

Count Ostrowg then revealed the motives behind the reservation of the French government: 'After the Accord of 22 December was signed, the Delegation, in all sincerity and with perfect goodwill, transferred during the first six months of the year all the Services to the Syrian government. Only one desire was expressed by the French side, that was, the conclusion of a Convention Universitaire. But this Convention, which was submitted to the Syrian government six months ago, was never signed.'

Fares bey: We have never refused to sign a Convention Universitaire with you.

Count Ostrowg: Yes, these promises were given, Mr President, by everyone, by all without exception. Meanwhile, the Syrian Parliament was presented with a bill for educational reform, which is contrary to the principle of the Convention Universitaire.

Jamil bey: This bill has never been presented to Parliament.

Count Ostrowg: We did not bargain with you. We ceded to you one by one the attributions of sovereignty. We expected an initiative on your part in favour of this Convention. We did not pressure you to sign it at the time that we were delivering, one by one, the attributions of sovereignty. Unfortunately, this initiative never came. This is the first point which was noted by the French government, and this explains its reservations. There is another point: this concerns the hostile attitude adopted by the Syrian press towards France, particularly on the occasion of 14 July, which is not only a French feast-day, but a universal feast-day, the feast-day of liberty.

The third point is strictly military. We thought that the end of hostilities in Europe would bring relief to the Allies of the burden of military occupation of Syria. But as events are developing now, such relief must be ruled out. The States of the Middle East, as declared by Nahas Pasha, will remain, after the end of hostilities in Europe, a base for the dispatch of troops to the Far East in the war against Japan. We must therefore expect the Allied occupation of the Levant to continue for several years. The British Command is taking dispositions to this end; so is the French Command. You will agree that this is a reason of a military and not of a political nature, which justifies French reservations.

Fares bey: Let us go back to the Accord of 22 December. Juridically, the transfer of the army is included in that Protocol.
Count Ostrorog: Not at all, Mr President.

Fares bey then read out the Protocol and underlined the passage which stipulated that France would hand to the Syrian government all the Services administered by the French in the name of Syria and for her account. The Prime Minister proved that the army is, in effect, a Service administered by France for Syria's account. Fares bey then said: 'There are of course the circumstances of war, but as in the case of the Security Services, we will define in the particular procedures for the transfer of the army in a separate protocol. This is also foreseen in the Accord of 22 December.'

Fares bey then demonstrates how the transfer will bring about practical benefits, in that it will avert clashes, conflicts and difficult discussions between the French and the Syrians. The incidents at the stadium, those of Aleppo and Rakka, those of 14 July, would not have happened if the army had been handed over to Syria.

Fares bey: There are intrigues in the country, intrigues against France and even against the government. The best way of putting an end to them is to finalise the question of the army. The affairs of Syria are followed closely by all the Arab countries. These will not prevent us from making accords with you, but first and before anything else, we must have the army. Then we shall see. I would like to explain to you the situation from the political standpoint: for the Chamber of Deputies the question of the army is fundamental. I would not like to go to the Chamber and say that France expects us to sign a treaty in order to transfer the troops. It would be adding fuel to the fire. Do you intend to keep the army until the end of hostilities?

General Beynet: This depends on my government. But I believe that the negotiations form an integral part. In an agreement you have to consider the interests of both parties. There is also the technical question.

Jamil bey: The draft of the accord had foreseen everything on this subject. The technical question is not an obstacle. There were no differences of view between us on this subject. The only impediment that delayed the transfer of the army was your difficulties with the British. Now these difficulties no longer exist. To our great joy a Franco-British Accord has interceded in London, transcending Franco-Syrian problems. We have greatly suffered from differences between you and the British; when one side said white, the other would say black. We were like a man trapped between his wife and his mother-in-law.

Colonel Oliva-Roget: Who is the mother-in-law?

Jamil bey: Settle this between you two.

General Beynet: If you are really happy about the accord made
between us and the British, why delay the conclusion of a treaty with us?

Jamil bey: In present circumstances, it would be very difficult for us to bind ourselves with anyone. During hostilities we will not conclude an agreement with any party. I will tell you frankly that we wish to have amicable relations with the British who have ties with neighbouring Arab countries. Iraq, Palestine and Egypt are allies of Britain. Saudi Arabia maintains friendly relations with her. But in our Arab policy, we have been very wise. Have you the intention of using the army as an instrument of pressure? When the British signed treaties with Egypt, the national army had been Egyptian for a long time. The same applies to Iraq. The Iraqi government had long had a national army before it signed a treaty with Britain. The army of the Levant is a national army. It is not a French army. If you have differences with the British it is not this army which would insure your presence in Syria. These negotiations over the army started a month after the Accord of 22 December. After many exchanges, a draft was prepared in June. According to that draft, half the army was to be transferred to Syria in August and the other half at the end of hostilities in Europe. All difficulties were removed. There was only one consideration that prevented the signing of the draft; that was fear of the British retaining troops in Syria. Now after the conclusion of the Accords in London, this apprehension no longer exists. I believe there is no reason why you should not transfer the army to us now. For our part, we have been keen to negotiate directly with you, without intermediaries.

Fares bey: The text of the Accord of 22 December, signed by both parties, makes the transfer of the army obligatory.

Count Ostrorog: The list of Services to be transferred to the Syrian government as established by General Catroux was limited. The army was not included.

Jamil bey: Let’s leave this text aside. We discussed with you whether we should adopt the text of ‘proclamation’ or ‘recognition’ of our independence. The fact is that our independence exists. It has been recognised by the Great Powers. Syria is determined to exercise this independence in all its aspects. Doubtless, we would like to maintain the most cordial relations with you and with the other members of the United Nations. But the army is an essential prerogative of independence and we wish to exercise this prerogative.

Count Ostrorog: Are you aware that the military disposition will remain in the country even after the armistice with Germany?

Jamil bey: It was Colonel Oliva-Roget who first informed me that the British were going to erect installations in Syria. This greatly astonishes me. The only explanation is perhaps Syria’s favourable climate.

General Beynet: This is perfectly true and we have no objection.
Actually there are British troops in France and this is natural. But we have information that you have authorised the British to carry on with these installations.

Jamil bey: The British asked us to allow troops to pass through Syria on their way to the Far East; it is obvious that we have to give our consent, but as for the information you have, there is no foundation for it.

Count Ostrorog: When General Catroux came to Syria in November, his mission was to negotiate a provisional *modus vivendi*. He did it in the most liberal and most conciliatory manner. The French government believes that the time has come for the transformation of the provisional *modus vivendi* into a definitive juridical status. This is the view of the French government. It is also the view of the British one. For 25 years the Syrian National Party has asked for a treaty with France. Now that we are offering it, they are refusing.

Jamil bey: We have ourselves concluded a treaty in 1936, and it was you who refused it.

Count Ostrorog: So you wish to punish France?

Jamil bey: If political figures in power commit errors, there is not a reason to punish others. Actually, circumstances now are no longer what they were in 1936. Eight years have elapsed. The Anglo-Iraqi and Anglo-Egyptian precedents can no longer be invoked. We do not know what course events will take. If you do, let me know. We do not know the state of the world of tomorrow and we have no right to anticipate the future. As for our amicable feelings for France, they have never changed.

*Jamil bey then evoked certain episodes of the 1925 Revolt and demonstrated that Syria never fought France, but the Mandate.*

General Beynet: I appreciate the Minister's kind sentiments.

*Jamil bey recalled the incidents of 14 July. He demonstrated that they were due to French attachment to certain outdated traditions: consular Mass, Crusades, protection of the Christians.*

Jamil bey: Nothing would have happened if the French had heeded the warnings of the Syrian government. Why was not a reception held instead of a Mass? Everyone would have come to the reception. The 14 July was never a religious feast and in organising this manifestation for the Christians, it shows a kind of protection that we do not accept. The Muslims and the Christians are Syrian citizens.

General Beynet: The Syrian government keeps on speaking of its good sentiments towards France. How are these sentiments expressed?

Count Ostrorog: If at least the Convention Universitaire had been signed.
Jamil bey reminded the Count of this project. He underlined that he had always been in favour of it, and if there was a delay in elaboration, this is not due to the Syrian government, but solely to the experts of the ministry of public education, French as well as Syrians. They only have to resume their discussions.

Count Ostrorog: Once again, we are not bargaining. But the French government would be pleased if this Convention was finalised.

Fares bey reminded the French side how France failed to keep her word between 1936 and 1939 and expressed his doubts about any agreement concluded with France. He reminded them also of the attempts by the Free French to proscribe Syrian sovereignty.

General Beynet: Since you made a treaty with us in 1936, why do you refuse to do so now? Have you changed?
Fares bey: It is not us who have changed, but circumstances have changed. We cannot now conclude a treaty. But you have no right to withhold the transfer of the army. Do you intend to keep this army indefinitely.
General Beynet: No, this would be too expensive.
Fares bey: Why then do you keep it and provoke trouble in the country against you?
Colonel Oliva-Roget: We know that you are the best statesmen in Syria. But those who will come after you, will not be like you.
Fares bey: Can a country be forced to make a treaty against its will? The army is not a pawn to be exchanged for a treaty.
General Beynet: I am under instructions from my government.

Jamil bey then asked General Beynet for details about his communication to the Lebanese government.

General Beynet: Upon my request to conclude a treaty, His Excellency Beshara al-Khoury told me that he did not wish to conclude a treaty with anyone; then eight days later, the Lebanese signed the Alexandria Protocol.
Fares bey: How does this affect your interests?
General Beynet: Since you conclude a treaty with a group of States there is no reason why you should refuse to conclude one with us.
Jamil bey: Did you tell His Excellency Beshara al-Khoury that you have the intention of calling into question the Accord of 22 December?
General Beynet: No, I said my government would be obliged to revise its policy towards Lebanon.
Jamil bey: If we do not wish to have a treaty with you, this means that we do not wish to follow in anyone's wake. The Alexandria Protocol has naturally an economic as well as a cultural dimension. This
is imposed by the nature of affairs. As for its political dimension, a clause was included to the effect that we could not conclude any accord with a foreign state which would be prejudicial to the other Arab states.

General Beynet: So if we wish to conclude an accord with you, we have to submit it first to Transjordan for approval? I am citing Transjordan because it is the closest country to Syria.

Jamil bey explained the clauses of the Alexandria Protocol. He reminded the French that the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty did not prevent Iraq from signing the Saadabad Pact or a treaty with Saudi Arabia.

Count Ostrorog: Do you believe that these accords were signed without British agreement?

Jamil bey: Doubtless with their consent. You must understand that we cannot conclude an accord with you that might be directed against Iraq.

Count Ostrorog: Is the Convention Universitaire prejudicial to Iraqi interests?

Fares bey: We will be the judge of that.

Jamil bey resumed his explanation. He spoke of the solidarity that exists between the Arab states.

Jamil bey: You know that Egypt and Iraq are the allies of Britain. Let us suppose for a moment that you are in conflict with the British; that you are, for example, with the Russians in one camp and the British in another. Our attitude will have to be that of all the other Arab states; we do not wish to witness events like those of 1940 in the future.

Count Ostrorog: This danger no longer exists.

Jamil bey: The British are now in agreement with you. They wish to see a strong France that would be consulted on all world matters. There is no need for you to be apprehensive. To say that we have concluded accords with other states, but not with you, is simply not true. Have we not concluded a monetary accord with you? What about the Accord of 22 December, by virtue of which we will keep French administrators?

Count Ostrorog: Well then let us call the treaty an accord.

Fares bey asked whether the French side was linking the question of the army to that of the treaty.

General Beynet: The instructions of my government are to tackle both questions simultaneously. But I am ready to relay your point of view. I wish to add that the position of my government is very friendly.

At the request of Jamil bey, the meeting was adjourned until the following morning of Wednesday, 25 October.
The Franco-Syrian talks for the resolution of the pending questions, resumed on 25 October at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. His Excellency Salim bey Takla, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Lebanese Republic, joined the Syrian representatives. The session was opened by Jamil Mardam Bey who reminded those present that the object of the meetings was to resolve, in a friendly and trusting atmosphere, the questions that are still in dispute. He also stated that Salim bey Takla had at first asked him if he, Mardam Bey, would represent Lebanon in what concerned the army. Then, following a meeting with the President of the Lebanese Republic, Mardam Bey proposed to his counterpart Salim bey, to participate in these talks, given the common character of the Syrian and Lebanese armies.

Fares bey: We consider that the army is part of the Common Interests, in exactly the same way that the Customs are.

General Beynet: This is not the view of my government. Syria and Lebanon, whose independence we have proclaimed, are two distinct countries. The problem of the army is not the same in Syria as it is in Lebanon. If Syria and Lebanon have concluded a treaty between themselves which engages them to have one army, then I say I have no knowledge of this. Meanwhile, we shall continue to acknowledge the independence of two States.

Salim bey: It is neither the intention of the Lebanese government nor the Syrian government’s to compromise in any way the independence of Lebanon. This is not simply a question of principle, it is a question of fact. I had initially asked my colleague, Jamil bey, to represent Lebanon, in these negotiations. Then, because of our interest in the question of the army, I myself came to Damascus with the full agreement of the Syrian government and at its request.

General Beynet: The Syrian army and the Lebanese army are utterly distinct. There might just be one point in common: that is the presence of Alawite elements in the Lebanese battalions. The Syrians and Lebanese are free to communicate to each other information about their negotiations. You also, Minister, are free to attend these talks, if these gentlemen do not find it inconvenient. But I have instructions to negotiate this question separately with each State.

Jamil bey reminded General Beynet that these negotiations were conducted jointly during the time of General Catroux.

General Beynet: There was only one precedent of joint Syro-Lebanese negotiations over the army: this was when the Lebanese prime minister came to Damascus for the purpose of ironing out the difficulties that had arisen during the negotiations.

Jamil bey: The Troupes Spéciales are administered by France, on
behalf of both Syria and Lebanon. We, therefore, consider the army as a Service of the Common Interest, and this is why I was keen to inform His Excellency, President Beshara al-Khouri, about our talks.

General Beynet: I have never failed myself to inform President Khouri of our negotiations with the Syrians. I regret infinitely that you have not informed me in advance of your wish to associate Lebanon with these exchanges of view.

Jamil bey: I telephoned Monsieur Ostrorog.

Count Ostrorog: Yes, half an hour before the meeting.

General Beynet: It is diplomatically customary for a state that wishes to have a third party participate in the negotiations with another state, to warn that state in advance. My country has the right to a certain respect. You wish to organise a common front: why did you not tell us so?

Jamil bey: If there is a common front, it is with you and not against you.

General Beynet: Since I have come to Syria and particularly to Lebanon, I have found exactly the opposite. France has constantly been insulted. I regret to have to say it to you. Every time that the Syrians and the Lebanese have been in agreement, it has been against my country.

Jamil bey: Allow me to tell you, General, that these reflections do not conform with the reality. We have only defended our independence. Independence for us is a right. You are patriots, so are we. This is natural. We will continue to defend our independence. We have never adopted a hostile attitude towards you. As for saying that you wish to take back the Common Interests or to go back on your word...

General Beynet: Who said that?

Count Ostrorog: I was astonished to hear from a young British colleague, Mr Young, that President Khouri reported such allegations to General Spears. The words of General Beynet to the Lebanese President have been singularly distorted. I also believe that we have an interest in negotiating separately with Lebanon.

Jamil bey: We have learnt that General Beynet told President Khouri that he had the intention, following the signature by Lebanon of the Alexandria Protocol, to put in question the independence of Lebanon. I have addressed myself to Salim bey in order to have clarifications. He has immediately answered my request. I therefore must pay tribute to my Lebanese colleague, who has always been correct.

Count Ostrorog: This is what actually happened: General Beynet had a tête-à-tête meeting with the President of the Lebanese Republic. His Excellency Beshara Khouri hastened to report this conversation to General Spears, and to report it in a distorted manner. General Spears is the representative of a power allied to France. It is not in diplomatic custom to misrepresent a conversation that one has had with a power
to the representative of another foreign power. Therefore Salim bey is not in question, but the President of the Republic is.

Salim bey: You will excuse me if I do not deal with a matter that concerns the President of the Republic without first referring to him.

General Beynet: I fully agree.

Count Ostrorog: We are ready to discuss with the Lebanese as we are discussing with you.

General Beynet: I have already transmitted to my government the explanation that was given to me by the Lebanese president, about the Lebanese point of view, concerning the Alexandria Protocol. President Beshara Khouri let me know that that Protocol had for Lebanon a provisional character, and that it would be up to committees of technicians to set out more detailed projects, which would in due course be submitted for the approval of the government and the parliament of each state.

Fares bey: We are not here to discuss the Alexandria Protocol, but to discuss the question of the army.

Jamil bey: The presence of Salim bey amongst us is not a sign of disregard. It is in the most cordial spirit that we are gathered here to discuss all the pending problems. One of them is the army. I believe that Lebanon should be associated with the negotiations on this subject.

Salim bey: Jamil bey has expressed a point of view. This point of view is not shared by you. Jamil bey considers that the question of the army is part of the Common Interests. You believe that the problem of the army should be treated separately with each state. I have already taken part in several negotiations in Damascus and have signed several accords concerning our Common Interests with Syria. Now, you are free to discuss separately the question of the army with the Lebanese government.

Salim bey then left the meeting to visit the President of the Syrian Republic and returned towards the end of the session.

Fares bey: This meeting is being held at our request. We are the requesters [demandeurs]. You have no demands for the moment. We are asking you to resume the negotiations over the army. These negotiations had resulted in a project. Then the negotiations were interrupted. We want to resume them. We will, in common agreement, fix the modalities for the transfer of the army. Tomorrow we have to face Parliament. We cannot tell Parliament that the negotiations over the army have failed. Therefore, the army must be passed over to Syria. This is our demand. We want an answer.

General Beynet explained that the project which was elaborated in Damascus was refused in Algiers. The reason for the French government's refusal lies in the hostile and inimical attitude adopted by the Syrian government against France.
General Beynet: My government is not hostile to the transfer of the army to the Syrian government, but it wishes to have precise details regarding the position of France in Syria after the transfer of the army.

Fares bey: Actually, each of the Great Allied Powers tells us something. But we do not know what the future holds.

Count Ostrorog: This is exactly why, after our agreement with the British, we ask you for specifics.

Fares bey: As long as the war is on we must be satisfied with the Protocols that we have signed. As for later, we cannot foresee anything.

Count Ostrorog: It is not prudent for states to live in confusion. Syria, like ourselves, like Great Britain, like all the states, must draw the lines of its general policy from now.

Jamil bey: As I have already said to Colonel Oliva-Roget, it is in a very positive and realistic spirit that we have the intention of tackling the problems which concern us. The British gave you the assurances that they do not wish to replace you in Syria. They also wish to see Franco-Syrian relations placed on a juridical and diplomatic basis. Have we not already concluded with you accords that we have not concluded with others?

General Beynet: I do not know.

Jamil bey: You must know. Isn't there a monetary accord and an accord over the Common Interests between us?

Fares bey: You have asked me to draw the lines of our policy towards France. We can say that there will be between us an eternal friendship. You also want a privileged position. Even when there was the Mandate, which has never been recognised by the country, this right or rather this position was refused to the mandatory Power by the League of Nations. If we now grant you a privileged position, I do not know what the attitude of the Great Powers would be towards us.

Count Ostrorog: We are not saying a privileged position, but a special position.

Fares bey: The Protocols that we have signed with you, give you a special position. Take for example, the Protocol over the tribes. Does it not hold a special position for you? The same applies to the mixed courts. Equally the counsellors. If you give us the army, you will also have in that domain a special position that other countries will not have.

Jamil bey: We have met in order to achieve results. I think that the transfer of the army has nothing to do with our future relations. We cannot foresee the future.

General Beynet: Don't you think that it would be useful to have clear ideas during the present turmoil [the World War]?

Jamil bey: Why anticipate events?

General Beynet: If we set from now the principles of our future
relations in a treaty, we should always be able to adapt ourselves to events. Is not life made up of such changes? But we must first conclude a treaty.

Both sides then discussed the various actions that provoke friction between the Syrians and the French (incidents with the gendarmerie, the police and the agents of the security services). They agreed that there are in both camps either too awkward or too zealous people. Precautions will be taken in the future to avoid these frictions.

The meeting was adjourned to the following day. Jamil bey asked the French to define the accords that they wished to propose to the Syrian government.

On 26 October the prime minister, Fares al-Kbouri opened the session. He asked General Beynet to speak.

General Beynet: We adjourned yesterday's meeting so as to give ourselves the chance to study effectively the issues that interest our two countries. This is why we are here today. I made 'un tour d'horizon' of the problems that are still in dispute. I will ask Count Ostrorog to enumerate the headings of chapters of all the questions that need to be solved.

Count Ostrorog: I will give an outline of the accords we wish to conclude with a view to settling the pending problems. These accords comprise:

1. A treaty of alliance: this treaty should not be difficult to conclude. It will have to take into account the interests of all parties concerned. All sovereign states form such alliances.
2. A military convention: this convention will regulate the transfer to Syria of the Troupes Spéciales, as well as the collaboration of a military mission for training the Syrian military.
3. A Convention of Establishment: it will be concluded on the basis of absolute reciprocity, without any restriction to your independence. We have interests in Syria. You have many Syrians established in France and in the French Empire. The Convention of Establishment will be as much in the interest of France as in the interest of Syria.
4. A consular convention.
5. A convention universitaire: this convention will be concluded on the basis of the text that was submitted to the Syrian government.

These are the headings of the chapters that cover the set of pending problems between our two countries. These problems have arisen as a result of Syria passing from the regime of the Mandate to that of independence. I believe that it is both urgent and necessary to resolve these problems and reach an accord.

General Beynet: Naturally, if you accept to discuss all these subjects,
we would deal with them in a most liberal spirit. For we sincerely want your independence. The issue of the army will also be settled.

Due to the importance of these matters, the Syrian government, at the request of Jamil Mardam Bey, proposed that the discussions be adjourned until Saturday morning, 28 October, at the ministry of foreign affairs.

Two more meetings took place on 28 and 30 October without a solution to the problems being reached. At the meeting of 30 October the French side gave the following details for the treaty of alliance:

1. The treaty of alliance will be a proper treaty of friendship.
2. This treaty will have a general formula, and Syria will be able to conclude such conventions with other states, if it deems this useful.
3. Nothing in this treaty will prejudice the interests of the United Nations of which France and Syria are members.

The Syrian government expressed its views on the treaty of alliance as follows:

1. Syria, like France, is a member of the United Nations, and is not in a position to conclude bilateral accords. Syria is not at present linked to any power; Syria is with the United Nations [sic].
2. Britain has proposed to the Syrian government that it establishes Syria's independence on a juridical and diplomatic basis. But the other Great Powers do not agree. They have unconditionally recognised our independence.
3. We do not know what the world of the future will be like. Hence, Syria wishes to go to the Peace Conference, free of all engagements. Syria declares that it is determined not to grant any other power the position that it is denying to France.
4. The Iraqi and Egyptian precedents cannot be invoked, as circumstances are at present very different from those that existed before the war.
5. The transfer of the army, which is a natural result of the recognition of our independence, cannot be subordinated to the conclusion of a treaty.
6. The Syrian government demands to enjoy the prerogatives of an independence that is not limited by any convention with any foreign state.
7. If an accord cannot be reached on this basis with the French side, the Syrian government proposes to call upon the good offices of the British government.

The French side stated that it is obliged to submit to the French government the view of the Syrian government.

Reading these minutes, one cannot help concluding that, despite
cordial appearances, the Franco-Syrian dialogue was in reality a dialogue of the deaf. There was no common point of departure. The Free French, having now established themselves in Paris, had no intention of yielding further. They wanted to restore the power of France in the countries they considered to be part of their empire. The Syrians, on the other hand, could not sign accords that they had earlier rejected, particularly as all the Arab states were on their side, as were the two Great Powers, the United States and the Soviet Union.

On 7 November Jamil Mardam Bey gave his reply to Eden's letter. He wrote that the Syrian government was satisfied to learn from the oral message, delivered by General Spears, that Britain had no intention of imposing any particular procedure or conditions on Syria. 'Nevertheless', he said, 'the Syrian government cannot share the view that the reasons put forward by His Majesty's Government would justify them in entering upon negotiations for the conclusion of a treaty with France.' Mardam Bey then enumerated all the Syrian reservations concerning a treaty and refuted Eden's argument about the Mandate. 'Syria now enjoys complete independence, both internally and externally... This state of affairs represents the realities of the situation and leaves no room for technical considerations concerning the Mandate and the League of Nations, which belong to the realm of theoretical discussion.'

With respect to Eden's reference to the Lyttelton-de Gaulle Agreement, where Britain admitted France's predominant position 'over any European Power', Mardam Bey inquired: 'What will be the position as regards non-European powers?' He added that, since receiving Eden's letter, his government had resumed talks with the French who had demanded the conclusion of several accords and conventions to secure for themselves 'a privileged position in Syria'. The Syrians had refused, making it clear that their intention was 'to maintain complete equality in their relations with all the foreign powers'. Mardam Bey pointed out in this connection that even 'the Mandate itself did not confer upon the mandatory Power such privileges'. In their talks with the French, he said, the Syrians demanded that the army be handed over under the terms of the military project of 1944. 'We could not tolerate that the army should remain in foreign hands and be used as a means of pressure to obtain a position which neither the Syrian parliament nor the Syrian People were willing to concede,' he added. Mardam Bey then warned: 'The troubles which may arise as a result of the present French policy are of a nature not only to do harm to the Syrian government, but will also impede the Allied war effort in Syria, and will inevitably reflect unfavourably upon the position of the United Nations in the Middle East.'

Eden received Mardam Bey's letter just before he and Churchill were leaving for Paris to meet de Gaulle. In Paris the British did raise with the
French the matter of handing over at least part of the Troupes Spéciales in order to avoid any more trouble and told the French that they, the British, would go ahead with the rearming of the gendarmerie. This issue had been raised again a few days earlier by Mardam Bey in a letter to the British in which he said that the long delay in delivering the arms had placed the gendarmerie in grave difficulties, and that he would now like a final decision so that, if the British government intended to reconsider the matter, the Syrian government would take other steps.

The year 1944 ended in Syria with Franco-Syrian relations at near breaking-point. Rumours were abroad of the future attitude of Britain following the publication of an article in *The Times*, in December 1944 on a new era of Anglo-French relations in the Levant. This was viewed with deep anxiety in Syria particularly as Spears was recalled at the time.

There is no indication in the Foreign Office documents that Spears was recalled at the request of the French government, but the Spears Mission had come to an end after the return of the Free French to Paris. Spears himself mentioned in his private papers in November 1944 that he wished to return to England to resume his parliamentary life and prepare for the forthcoming elections, which would no doubt take place once the war was over. But it was universally rumoured that Spears was recalled in order to pave the way for closer Franco-British cooperation in the Middle East.

On 12 December 1944 the Syrians addressed an *aide-mémoire* to General Beynet following incidents in Damascus on the occasion of a Red Cross ball that was due to be held, and which President al-Quwatli had agreed to attend. When the French insisted that the president be saluted by French troops on his arrival at the ball, al-Quwatli refused to attend. Oliva-Roget said: 'Tant pis.' In response the Syrian government delivered this note to Beynet: 'Thus, in the light of this attitude, the Syrian government declares that it no longer wishes to have relations with Monsieur le Colonel Oliva-Roget, whom it considers chiefly responsible for this incident.' Thereupon, on 21 December 1944, Beynet delivered a stiff note to the Syrian government demanding with veiled threats that press attacks against the French must cease. Discord was growing by the minute.

NOTES

1. FO 371/40318, 20 October 1944.
2. Ibid.
CHAPTER IX

The Growing Discord

End of the Spears Mission

General Sir Edward Spears left Syria at the end of 1944 and was replaced by Terence Shone who had occupied the post of minister plenipotentiary in Egypt. On the eve of his departure, Eden gave him written instructions regarding policy in Syria. Eden wrote:

First of all, I wish to confirm that it is the declared policy of His Majesty’s Government to support the independence of the Levant States and to encourage its growth. This independence in the view of His Majesty’s Government can best be regulated internationally by means of a formal agreement between the Levant States and France and it is the policy of His Majesty’s Government to facilitate the conclusion of such an agreement. The only apparent means by which the independence of the Levant States can finally be established is by an agreement. The Levant States have not so far been willing to accept this point of view . . . But I can see no other satisfactory issue . . . You should therefore continue to prepare the ground for such an agreement . . . recommending this course as best and indeed the only course to pursue in their own interests.1

Eden was still attached to this idea despite the numerous warnings he received. Perhaps he believed that, with Spears out of the way, the task of bringing pressure to bear on the Syrian leaders would be easier. There was also another major change in the British diplomatic scene in the Middle East following the assassination of Lord Moyne by Zionist terrorists in Cairo on 4 November 1944. Yitzhak Shamir, the former prime minister of Israel, admitted openly in an interview given to Television Suisse Romande in 1966 that he had himself taken the decision to assassinate Moyne because Moyne was opposed to Zionist policy in Palestine. Moyne was succeeded as minister resident in Cairo by Sir Edward Grigg. Both Lord Moyne and General Spears were close friends of the British prime minister and were thus able to communicate directly to him the feeling of the Syrians towards a treaty with France. With the removal of Moyne and Spears, Eden may have felt that he would be able to carry out his promises to France without much interference from Churchill.
In his first report from Syria, Shone stated that in the course of his conversations with the Syrians and Lebanese he ‘had found their attitude as regards a treaty with France to be even harder’ than he had expected, adding that the attitude of the Syrians towards France had ‘struck’ him as ‘particularly unyielding’. The report, which was dated 1 January 1945, ended with the warning: ‘If the Levant States feel that we are letting them down they may well seek backing from some other power. The Soviet Union would be a likely choice.’

On 1 January 1945 Mardam Bey left for Cairo to attend a meeting of the preparatory committee for the drawing up of the charter of the Arab League. In Cairo Mardam Bey met General Clayton with whom he discussed the British and French military presence in Syria. Mardam Bey told Clayton that his government would not conclude a treaty with France and that it expected the Allied troops to withdraw after the armistice in Europe. Two days later, on 5 January, Mardam Bey met Sir Edward Grigg with General Clayton and repeated to them Syria’s attitude towards Eden’s assertions that a treaty was the only means by which Franco-Syrian relations could be settled after the war. He said that Syria would under no circumstances grant any privileges to France or any other power. The Syrian government was determined to take over the Troupes Spéciales, he said, and it wished to see a simultaneous withdrawal of British and French troops as soon as the war was over. He also refuted all the arguments put forward by Eden in favour of a treaty with France and warned Grigg that if Britain persisted in applying pressure on Syria there would be damaging repercussions on British interests in the Arab world.

Mardam Bey then held separate meetings with Nuri al-Said Pasha, the Iraqi prime minister, and Ahmad Maher Pasha, the Egyptian prime minister. At both meetings, Mardam Bey told them about the difficulties the Syrians were having with the French and the British concerning the question of the treaty. Nuri Pasha pledged Iraqi support for the Syrian stand and even promised military help should the situation deteriorate. Maher Pasha expressed the view that the reason why Britain was advocating a treaty with France was to limit Syrian independence, as total independence for Syria would prompt Egypt and Iraq to demand the termination of their own treaties with Britain. Mardam Bey was gratified to note that Maher Pasha’s observations, as well as Nuri Pasha’s attitude, coincided with Syria’s. Syria needed the understanding and support of Egypt and Iraq where the British had most to lose.

Growing tension between France and Syria

During Mardam Bey’s visit to Cairo, Beynet sent a note to President al-Quwatli protesting against ‘the immediate application of the programmes of secondary education’ adopted by the Syrian government on
4 December 1944. He remarked that the application of these programmes modified 'appreciably the system of education' and gave it 'a different character from the one it had hitherto', and that consequently his government regarded this matter as an obstacle to the conclusion of a 'Convention Universitaire' between Syria and France. Actually the Syrian government, after having studied the terms of this convention presented by the French, had decided to reject it as it constituted an infringement of Syrian independence. The French demanded that all Syrian state schools should teach French as a compulsory subject starting from the primary stages. They demanded that French textbooks should be used and that French cultural missions should be given predominance over other cultural missions. The French also objected strongly to a Syrian government order making the Syrian baccalauréat the only valid qualification for employment in the civil service. This had the effect of excluding French nationals from joining the civil service. President al-Quwatli did not reply directly to Beynet, but referred the matter to Mardam Bey upon his return from Cairo, in accordance with diplomatic protocol. In communicating directly with the president, Beynet was asserting France's pre-eminence.

Mardam Bey wrote to Beynet that the question of educational reform was in the purely 'internal domain'. As for the projected Convention Universitaire, the Syrian government estimated that it constituted 'an infringement on the exercise of the sovereign rights of the country'.

Meanwhile, the question of the army was still arousing public interest despite the fact that negotiations between the Syrians and the French had ceased since October. A bill was debated in the Syrian parliament calling for the formation of a Syrian national army in the event of a French refusal to hand over the Troupes Spéciales. Mardam Bey, in his capacity as minister of defence, declared during the debate that his government was 'absolutely determined to have an army', that the Troupes Spéciales were Syrian and should not continue under foreign command, and that the government would not conclude a treaty with France. In his capacity as foreign minister, Mardam Bey tackled the question of the treaty by a thinly veiled reference to the British position, saying: 'Some are asking us why we do not wish to conclude a treaty with France. They want us to accept the notion that there should be a master and a subordinate; they want us to give confirmation to the diminution of sovereignty imposed upon us in circumstances known to all... They wish by means of a treaty to prevent our country from achieving its sovereignty and total independence... I declare that we are free and that we shall not submit to any force no matter what that force is.' It was in that speech that first official mention was made of outside pressure being exercised on the Syrian government to conclude a treaty with France. It was in fact a warning to the British that if they
continued to support French demands, the whole issue might become public and so cause a great deal of embarrassment to the British in the Arab world.

Mardam Bey followed up his speech by handing Beynet two notes, one regarding the question of the army, the other regarding French diplomatic representation in Syria. On the question of the army, Mardam Bey wrote that in October 1944 Beynet had promised to relay the Syrian demand for the transfer of the Troupes Spéciales to the French government urging them for a quick reply; but, as two months had elapsed without a word, the Syrian government hoped 'to receive satisfaction within a brief delay'. Mardam Bey reminded Beynet that the Troupes Spéciales were 'formed of exclusively Syrian elements and must be transferred to the National Authority'. On the question of the French diplomatic representation in Syria, he reminded Beynet that his government had in October 1943 drawn the attention of the French ambassador to the necessity of adapting the French representation to Syria to the 'conditions of the regime of sovereignty'. The Syrian government had on various occasions renewed that request. He remarked that, since the establishment of the Provisional Government in Paris, the French had agreed to the accreditation of a Syrian minister plenipotentiary to Paris; therefore the Syrian government expected 'to see shortly the French representation in Syria take the form of diplomatic usage, like other countries'.

Copies of these notes to Beynet were communicated to the representatives of the Soviet Union, the United States, Great Britain and the Arab states. The tension was rising between Syria and France, and Beynet added fuel to the fire by telling Fouad Hamza, the Saudi ambassador to Turkey, who was passing through Lebanon, that it was impossible to come to any agreement with either the Syrian or Lebanese governments. He also said that the inefficiency and reputation of the Syrian and Lebanese statesmen were sufficient to ensure their removal and replacement by men who would cooperate. He added that Syria and Lebanon were not fit for independence and accused General Spears (by then gone) of being at the root of all the trouble by following policies which were not shared by his own government. He pointed out that Britain's policy was now in line with that of France and that from then on France would not be lenient over matters concerning its interest. He added that the improvement of France's position in Europe would have repercussions in Syria, and that the Troupes Spéciales would not be handed over as the Syrian government would use them to expel France from Syria, but that France was ready to fight if the Syrians wanted another Maysaloun. Beynet went even further in his hostility by remarking that the French had good relations with Emir Abdullah of Transjordan and had no objection to encouraging him if
need be. Beynet's outburst reflected lack of judgement, especially when he hinted to a Saudi official that the French might have to use a Hashemite to retain their influence in Syria. There had been an exchange of letters between Beynet, de Gaulle and Emir Abdullah when the Emir offered to act as intermediary between France and Syria.

On 15 January, two days after that meeting, the subject of Beynet's conversation with Fouad Hamza was raised by the Syrian president and Mardam Bey when Sir Edward Grigg visited Damascus. The British minister reported to Eden that as a result of his conversations in Syria he was 'deeply impressed' by the 'quiet determination' of the Syrian leaders 'to conclude no treaty with France according her a privileged position'. He wrote:

They are convinced (not without reason) that the position which France desires to claim in Syria and Lebanon is inconsistent with independence and with the recognition already accorded them by the United States and Soviet Union. The American Minister here entirely shares their views in this respect... In Syria I was left in no doubt regarding strength of feeling on the question of transfer of Troupes Spéciales... Unless the French changed their methods and manners, we shall find ourselves alone with them and completely at variance not only with the Arab world but with our principal Allies... As I see things, the gulf between the local governments and the French is at present so wide that all the fact and persuasion in the world are unlikely to bridge it.9

Shone also sent a report supporting Grigg's assessment of the situation in Syria and stated that Beynet's 'most unwise remarks to the Saudi minister at Ankara have now of course become public property and have further embittered relations which were already unpleasantly strained'. He added: 'The Syrian government and the French local authorities are now to all intents and purposes no longer on speaking terms and the notes they exchange become more and more curt and acrid... In so far as relations between the Syrians and French are concerned, the aim at present must be to prevent an explosion.' Shone remarked that the local governments have on the whole been 'commendably patient' and that they had been recognised 'as capable of running their own show by many Powers besides ourselves'. Lest he be accused of being anti-French, Shone concluded by saying: 'I know you believe me when I say that this letter is not prompted by any anti-French feeling. And I fully appreciate the importance to us of France's friendship. But I am bound to give the local picture as I see it.4

Confusion in British policy

The more the tension between France and Syria grew, the more confused British policy became. After receiving the various reports from
Syria, Eden’s initial reaction was to instruct his ambassador in Paris, Duff Cooper, to tell the French foreign minister, Bidault, that although the British government had ‘constantly endeavoured to meet French views’ it could not allow the French to do as they wish in Syria or make a bargain with them at the expense of the Levant states. He wrote:

Either the French are prepared to come to terms on conditions which the Arab world and the Great Powers can regard as acceptable, or they will be faced with a general attack on their position... the French must be made to see that there are limits to the extent to which we are prepared to incur odium and hostility or still more endanger our position in the Middle East on their behalf.

At the same time, Eden sent a telegram to Shone instructing him to ‘take an early opportunity of tackling the Syrian government seriously on the necessity for arriving soon at an agreed settlement of their future relations with the French’ and to impress upon them that Britain ‘ever since 1941’ had ‘made clear its expectations of a negotiated settlement’, in which, Eden claimed, the states themselves had ‘seemed to acquiesce’. Strangely enough, Eden’s assumption that the states acquiesced was based on the reply given by the Lebanese president, Alfred Nakkash, in November 1941 to Catroux’s Proclamation of Independence. Eden overlooked the crucial fact that the Syrian government was not bound by promises or declarations made by a French-appointed Lebanese president. Eden also told Shone to tell the Syrians that there was a question which needed an ‘internationally agreed settlement in due course’, namely the position of racial and religious minorities. This was said at a time when the head of the Syrian government, Fares al-Khourï, belonged to the Protestant religious minority. Ignoring that fact altogether, Eden asserted that Britain ‘could not, for instance, agree that the Mandate should disappear without the Syrian and Lebanese governments reaffirming their obligations not to discriminate against their racial and religious minorities.’

Popular demand for a national army

At the same time as these two messages were sent to Paris and Damascus respectively, the Foreign Office asked its ambassador in Washington, Lord Halifax, to transmit a message to the United States State Department to the effect that ‘the Levant States have persisted in their refusal to enter into discussions with the French’, and that the Foreign Office believed that these states did not know what the French propose in detail. It requested that the State Department be informed of
its instructions to Shone and to 'invite them [the State Department] to ask their minister in Damascus to support' the British representations. This message to Washington was either a deliberate misrepresentation of events, based on the assumption that the Americans were unaware of what was happening in Syria, or a clumsy attempt to impress on the Americans that what information they had was not true. It is interesting to note that the Foreign Office did not find it necessary to inform the United States of its instructions to Paris, nor to refer to the French attitude in any way.

Following Mardam Bey's strong speech in parliament, there was a sharp rise in tension. Orderly student demonstrations took place in Damascus and throughout Syrian towns calling for the creation of a national army. The French took military measures by ordering their troops to patrol certain areas in Damascus. These measures were considered provocative by the government since the student demonstrations were peaceful and the government was in full control of the situation. On 21 January Mardam Bey sent a note of protest to the French authorities, and when this remained unanswered, he summoned all the diplomatic representatives in Damascus and gave them a copy of a stiff note addressed to the French demanding the evacuation of French troops from the streets.

Mardam Bey's initiative was contrary to the advice of the prime minister, Fares al-Khouri, but had the support of President al-Quwatli and that of the president of the Chamber, Saadallah al-Jabri. In his diaries, Mardam Bey wrote that when the news broke of French troops coming out on the streets, the cabinet held an urgent meeting at the ministry of foreign affairs, where a 'heated argument' developed between him and the prime minister, causing the meeting to be moved to the presidency. Mardam Bey insisted on making a prompt and tough stand against French initiatives whereas the prime minister advised caution and a policy of 'wait and see' and hoped that, through secret talks, the French might be persuaded to withdraw their troops. Mardam Bey's point of view was that if the government showed the slightest sign of weakness at a time when public opinion was running high and calling for tough action, and when parliament was also pressing for tough action, not only would the government lose credibility but, more importantly, Syria would lose its newly acquired independence. By acquiescing to the French show of force, Syria would miss a historic opportunity to demonstrate its determination to achieve full independence.

President al-Quwatli called in Saadallah al-Jabri to the cabinet meeting to give the ministers an exposé of the mood of the Chamber. Al-Jabri said that members of parliament were already talking of the weakness shown by the government. At that meeting both the president
and the president of the Chamber supported Mardam Bey's view, but the prime minister still expressed misgivings about escalating an already tense situation and said plainly that he was not prepared for a confrontation with the French; thereupon he tendered his letter of resignation to the president. Al-Quwatli took the letter but advised him to carry on with his duties. All the other cabinet ministers were of the opinion that al-Khourí's resignation should be kept secret until the crisis was over lest it be exploited by the French. (In the event he stayed on.)

Saadallah al-Jabri also informed the cabinet that parliament would be voting on the budget on 24 January and that a number of deputies had already informed him that they would like to pass a motion calling on the government to allocate a substantial sum for the creation of an army, since it had now become universally clear that the French were not prepared to transfer the Troupes Spéciales. Mardam Bey immediately contacted the leaders of these deputies, namely Akram al-Hourani, Qasim al-Hunaidi and Jamal Ali Deeb, and told them that the government had already proposed to parliament to vote on the budget, which incorporated the allocation of 15 million Syrian pounds for the expenditure of the Troupes Spéciales when these returned to Syrian command; there was therefore no reason, he argued, to divert attention from the Syrian demand for the transfer of these troops who were entirely Syrian and whose training and equipment had been paid for by Syria. The creation of a new army would make the French less inclined to give in to Syria's demand, and the French might even use the Troupes Spéciales against Syria rather than risk frittering them away. The deputies were convinced by this argument and agreed to change the motion from that of creating a new army to one supporting the government in its effort to recover the Troupes Spéciales, and accordingly agreed to vote for the government budget designed for that purpose.

On the morning of 24 January Fares al-Khourí contacted Mardam Bey and asked for his help to deal with a student demonstration that had concentrated in front of the prime minister's office in the Serail, clamouring for the creation of an army. This was on the same day that parliament was meeting to vote on the budget. Mardam Bey immediately proceeded to the Serail and addressed a speech to the students in which he assured them of the government's determination to take over the Troupes Spéciales who, he said, 'were our sons who found themselves being used as pawns in the hands of the colonial power'. He further said that Syria did not need a new army since it already had an army and that it was the duty of every Syrian to liberate that army from foreign control. Mardam Bey's speech was well received and the students dispersed. Later in the day Parliament voted unanimously in support of the government's proposals.
Britain's dilemma

On that same day President al-Quwatli asked Shone and the British commander, General Holmes, to lunch with him and Mardam Bey. The president asked Holmes how, in the light of the present tense situation and of the deployment of French troops, the Ninth Army would react if the French were to open fire. He made it clear to Holmes that the French would refrain from doing so only if they were made to believe beyond doubt that British troops would intervene. Holmes did not disagree, but said that he was unable to give him a straight answer without referring to London. He then immediately sent a message to the War Office requesting instructions. The War Office informed the Foreign Office that it was evident from Holmes's message that he was anxious to have authority in advance to take measures considered necessary 'in the event of disorders in the Levant' and that in his 'opinion, strong action taken without delay would probably have the effect of suppressing immediate trouble and moreover of localising it and thus reducing the risks of trouble throughout the MIDDLE EAST'. Despite the urgent tone of Holmes's request, the War Office replied: 'By reason of the policy by which we are at present bound, it is not possible to lay down definite guidance until actual disturbances occur.' Holmes was told that his action should in the first place be confined to the protection of British installations and troops, and that the Foreign Office had given the War Office 'assurances' that, in the event of an emergency, 'a political solution would immediately be sought'. The War Office ended on an apologetic note: 'We have every sympathy with your approach to the problem which militarily has everything to recommend it and we realise that the above instructions do not make your task any easier. But you will appreciate that in face of the wider political issues which must be taken into consideration and which have resulted in policy we are unable to give you any more definite guidance. The War Office message to Holmes was another indication of the confusion in British policy reflecting a divergence of opinion between the military and political establishments. One can only gather that the Foreign Office, with Eden at its head, could not understand the extent to which the Syrians were determined to realise their demands.

The British military were anxious to retain bases in Syria after the war, but the continued French presence rendered this impossible. When Sir Edward Grigg suggested that in order to defuse the tense situation in Syria, the British and French 'should clear out their garrison from the Levant simultaneously', thus finally getting rid of French suspicions of British designs to supplant France, the Foreign Office remarked:

Sir E. Grigg is not aware that the Post Hostilities Planning Committee is
The Growing Discord

about to recommend that for the defence of the Suez Canal it will in future be necessary for us to organise defence measures in a wide zone to the north and that for this purpose we shall need certain strategic rights ourselves in the Levant States (viz. rights to establish air fields and radar stations, rights of transit and emergency, and possibly even to establish some camps there for our Middle East reserve).7

Meanwhile, the Foreign Office, finding itself faced with an intractable problem in Syria, tried to come up with a solution that might be acceptable to both the French and the Syrians. Eden wrote to Shone regarding a suggestion he believed Wadsworth had once made to the effect that the Syrian government ‘might present to France, Great Britain, America and Russia a simple form of treaty with consular, educational and other conventions annexed’. Eden asked Shone to find out whether this was true and, if so, to ask the Syrians what exactly they had in mind, adding that he was not sure that this procedure ‘would advance matters much’, but that it would ‘at least help the Syrians to clear their own minds regarding what they would be prepared to offer the French’. Eden had misinterpreted a remark made by President al-Quwatli in one of his conversations, that Syria would never sign a treaty with France which it would not sign with any other power. Shone replied that Wadsworth told him that the proposal mentioned above ‘did not originate with him’ and that he did not wish it ‘to become linked with his name’ since all that took place was that ‘in the course of a general talk’, the president asked him ‘personally to obtain for his private information a draft outline of a basic treaty of friendship, commerce, establishment of consular relations’. Shone also reported that Wadsworth advised him that the ‘time was altogether inopportune’ for him to approach the Syrian government along the lines of Eden’s instructions. Shone went on to say that when he told the Syrian president that the ‘tone of recent notes to the French was too sharp’, and suggested to him to avoid provoking the French, the president replied that a solution for the Troupes Spéciales must be found ‘if there were to be any real improvement in the atmosphere’ and that if he and his government were ‘to suppress the Chamber and stifle public opinion on a national issue of this sort it would be sheer dictatorship and he could not do it’.8

In its eagerness to find evidence to support its case, the Foreign Office asked Shone to examine Spears’s files for any document that would suggest that the Syrians had ever discussed a separate treaty with Britain. Shone found none and requested permission from the Foreign Office to ask Sergeant Petrie, the man in charge of the files, whether he could recollect having come across any such document which had not been sent to the registry. The hapless Shone found himself depending on the memory of Sergeant Petrie to provide his government with the
direction of Britain's foreign policy in Syria. In short, the confusion into which the Foreign Office got itself rendered British policy in Syria ineffectual. Britain's representative in Syria was unable to bide by its instructions, while its ambassador in Paris was criticising its policy there. Duff Cooper said that it would not be easy to 'justify a policy, that while acknowledging the predominant position of France', Britain would retain 'a kind of tutelary overlordship which permitted the lesser powers to appeal to Great Britain against decisions of the predominant power'. He added: 'In practice such a policy must lead to disaster.' The thrust of his argument was that since the First World War Britain had been embarrassed in Palestine

by the pursuance of a dual policy, which we imposed on ourselves by having given pledges to both Arabs and Jews. Let us not repeat the error in the Levant, but rather decide which of two sides we are going to support... and let us not blind ourselves to the unpleasant fact that the natives of the Levant, like the natives of Egypt and India, are never going to be completely content until they have entirely eliminated the influence of all Europeans.9

The Americans were unwilling to support British policy. They told the Egyptians that if the Levant states granted France any privileges, they too would expect the same concessions for themselves. The Iraqis and the Egyptians were not willing to support the British position either. Lord Killeam, the British ambassador in Cairo, warned that if the Syrian government was to give way, under British pressure, on matters affecting Syria's independence 'which we have formally guaranteed, political reaction here in Egypt will be lamentable'. The Iraqi prime minister, Nuri Pasha al-Said, publicly declared: 'If the Syrian government will define now the help it desires, Iraq will promptly meet its appeal.' The Russians, Shone reported, 'took the line that the local governments had the right to national armies, that the French ought to put their representation on a normal diplomatic footing and that they could not accept recognition of a privileged position.'10

Growing unrest in Syria

While all these discussions between the Foreign Office and its envoys were taking place, the unrest in Syria was growing by the day. The demonstrations extended to all parts of Syria, and there was serious trouble in Jabal Druze. General Humblot, commander-in-chief of the French forces, informed General Holmes that under the Lyttelton-de Gaulle Agreement he would be 'compelled' to intervene to maintain order should the local police fail. Holmes replied that this was a matter for the commander-in-chief of the Middle East Forces and that he would
view any action by Humblot with deep concern. Humblot’s message to Holmes was an indication to the British that the French were contemplating the use of force to quell demonstrations as a matter of right. This augured ill for the Foreign Office which was trying what it believed to be its best endeavours to avert a military clash.

On 2 February 1945 Sultan al-Atrash — who had led the revolt in Jabal Druze in 1925 — visited Damascus and offered to lead a revolt against the French. Al-Quwatli thanked him for his patriotism, but told him that such a course should only be followed as a last resort, that is if the French finally and categorically refused to transfer the Troupes Spéciales which he believed to be tantamount to their reneging on their promise of independence. Al-Atrash’s visit coincided with a statement issued by the French cabinet to the effect that France was responsible for internal security in Syria because of its pre-eminent position there.

Shone’s mission was becoming increasingly difficult. He was witnessing an explosive situation and was being asked to defuse it as best he could, which so far amounted to little. Thus any glimmer of hope which presented itself spurred him into action. Early in the morning of 1 February he contacted Mardam Bey at home and told him he had an urgent message for him. Mardam Bey subsequently wrote in his private notes that he was puzzled by Shone’s early telephone call, and was most surprised when he met Shone later to hear that the urgent message was merely the fact that Count Ostrorog was arriving in Damascus the following day with the intention of resuming talks with the Syrian government. Shone expressed his hope that the Syrians would receive him well. Mardam Bey was not in the least surprised by the news, but rather by the British attaching so much importance to Ostrorog’s visit. In fact, only five days earlier, Ostrorog had been in Damascus where he had spent the whole evening dining at Mardam Bey’s residence. Shone’s excitement over Ostrorog’s visit confirmed Mardam Bey’s suspicion that the British were in a quandary. Mardam Bey did not tell Shone that Ostrorog had been dining with him just a few days before, but assured him that the Count would be well received. Later in the evening, Geoffrey Furlonge, the British counsellor in Damascus, contacted Mardam Bey to arrange an appointment for Shone to see him and the president to deliver to them officially a message from Eden. Shone, who had not yet transmitted Eden’s message of 26 January, thought that with Ostrorog in Damascus next day, it would be an opportune moment to deliver Eden’s message.

The president and Mardam Bey met Shone on 3 February. Shone delivered a memorandum based on Eden’s instructions to him which stated that the British government, while respecting Syria’s independence, found that the Syrian government had no excuse for not entering into agreements with the French to settle their differences and
it urged both sides to enter immediately into negotiations for that purpose. Shone told the president that the Syrians should ask the French what their precise demands were and try to come to terms with them. Al-Quwatli and Mardam Bey told Shone that while they appreciated Eden's concern, the ball was in the French court, and that if Britain was sincere in wishing to defuse the tense situation, it should instead urge the French to transfer the Troupes Spéciales, since that was the only Syrian demand. Mardam Bey told Shone that Ostrorog had not come to Damascus as Shone had informed him, and that instead the Syrians had received the text of a French cabinet communiqué to the effect that France alone was responsible for the maintenance of order in Syria. Shone reported back to London: 'Minister for Foreign Affairs has been spoken to in accordance with instructions... Minister was not receptive.'

Count Ostrorog finally came to Damascus on 5 February. He met Mardam Bey on the same day and later had dinner with him alone. At the meeting Ostrorog said that he had come especially to discuss the prevailing crisis and that he was not authorised to discuss the Troupes Spéciales and that General Beynet was considering going to Paris to sound out his government on the pending issues. Ostrorog suggested to Mardam Bey that the Syrian government might also consider sending a cabinet minister to Paris at the same time to hold talks with the French government. The Count thought that perhaps Mardam Bey himself, with all the contacts he had in France, might undertake that mission. Mardam Bey replied that he would report this conversation to the president and would discuss further his suggestions at dinner. Mardam Bey was personally not inclined to consider Ostrorog's suggestion as he was not psychologically prepared to conduct negotiations on French territory after his disappointing experiences during 1936-8. The president was of the same opinion.

When Mardam Bey later met Ostrorog, he told him that the Syrian government and the president were unable to consider sending anyone to Paris before an agreement had been reached in Syria. He told the Count that the crisis that might result from a failed mission would be impossible to contain, but that on the other hand the Syrian government was willing to discuss any French proposals for solving the present crisis; as for the Syrians, they had only one demand: the transfer of the Troupes Spéciales. Mardam Bey impressed upon Ostrorog the urgency of averting an explosion and promised him that on the Syrian side every effort would be made in that regard on condition that the French restrained their people in Syria. Mardam Bey added that parading French troops in Syrian streets and issuing communiqués claiming French responsibility for the maintenance of order and asserting French primacy in Syria, was by no account a reasonable way of tackling a very
sensitive situation. Ostrorog agreed with the last point and said he would try to do what he could and promised to give the Syrians his government’s reply within a week. A week passed, and several more, without word from the French.

President al-Quwatli’s visit to Saudi Arabia and Egypt

On 8 February the Syrian president left on a state visit to Saudi Arabia and Egypt. In Riyadh, al-Quwatli explained the situation in Syria to King Ibn Saud and told him that his government was unable to bow to British pressure for the conclusion of a treaty with France and that, although he appreciated the king’s concern over Syria, it was not possible for him to accept the king’s advice to pursue negotiations with the French along the lines advocated by Britain. He told the king that he would appreciate his help in advising the British to adopt a different policy, and that he himself would say so to Churchill at his forthcoming meeting with him in Cairo. He also said that Syria had the support of both the United States and the Soviet Union in its refusal to allow France a privileged position in Syria, and that he had understood from the Americans that they had informed the king of their attitude. The Syrian president left Saudi Arabia with the assurances of the Saudi king that he would use his influence with the British and the French to help Syria recover its army and maintain its independence.

From Riyadh, al-Quwatli proceeded to Cairo, where Mardam Bey joined him. The president arrived in Egypt on 12 February and received a very warm welcome from the Egyptian people and the Egyptian king, Farouk, who had the friendliest personal relations with the Syrian Nationalists. The King pledged his personal as well as his country’s full support for Syrian demands, and told the president that even if the British were to put pressure on his government to persuade the Syrians to conclude a treaty with France, he himself would not accept such pressure. King Farouk told Shukri bey that Syria’s total independence would create a precedent to be followed by those Arab and Muslim states which were still bound by treaties to colonial powers. The king’s staunch support for the Nationalists reflected the strength of popular Egyptian feelings towards the Syrian cause, a circumstance Lord Killeam had warned his government about.

President al-Quwatli’s encounter with Churchill and Eden

During his stay in Cairo the Syrian president held a meeting with Churchill and Eden on 17 February 1945. At the meeting, he told
Churchill that the situation in Syria was potentially explosive because of French provocation and French refusal to transfer the Troupes Spéciales, despite the fact that a special agreement regarding the transfer had actually reached the point of being signed in June 1944. The French had then given as an excuse for not signing the presence of British forces in Syria and the possibility of Britain supplanting France. Churchill assured al-Quwadi that Britain had no such intention. Eden said that he had urged the French to communicate their proposals to the Syrians and hoped that the Syrians would put forward counter-proposals if they found the French ones unacceptable. The president replied that he did not believe that the French would communicate any proposals, and that even if they did, they would be asking for a privileged position for themselves which Syria could not admit; he gave as an example the draft of the educational convention whose purpose was to gain a large measure of control of the educational system in Syria. Churchill said that in his opinion the Syrians should arrange something reasonably satisfactory and that they 'should not throw the French out altogether'. But the Syrian side was not moved and said that no privileged position would be given, although Syria would be prepared to make the kind of agreement with France that it would make with any other power. Churchill insisted that the French should have 'a position of some sort'. The Syrians replied that the French might be given 'most-favoured-nation treatment', but that they would first have to give up the Troupes Spéciales. Eden said that the French foreign minister, Bidault, would not make concessions over the Troupes Spéciales without receiving anything in return. At this point al-Quwatli expressed his fears that, with the situation being what it was, the Troupes Spéciales might be used by the French against the Syrian population which would be an 'intolerable situation'. To this Churchill remarked that in such an event there would surely be a mutiny, an observation with which the Syrians agreed.

Churchill also impressed upon the Syrian president the need to 'tactfully handle' the situation and to try to settle it without serious quarrels; the Syrians should 'not trample on French amour-propre', he said; 'constant rows' with the French were very 'annoying' to the British government, which was friendly with both the Arabs and the French. Churchill warned the Syrians that British troops would not stay 'indefinitely' in Syria and that it would be to Syria's advantage to settle its problems with the French while the British were still there, and that, while discussions should begin as soon as possible over the army, the Syrians should not try to force the issue prematurely. Shukri bey replied that he would try to handle the situation carefully, provided there was 'no undue provocation', and that, unless concessions were forthcoming about the question of the Troupes Spéciales, it would be impossible for
him and his government to restrain parliament and public opinion. He added that the British premier was well aware that in a democracy, it is not a president of the republic who imposes policy.

The conversation with Churchill did not solve any immediate problems, but at least it showed the Syrians that the British were in a dilemma. Not once during the meeting did the British side make any explicit reference to a treaty with France, or to the Lyttelton–de Gaulle Agreement, or to a privileged position for France as had been advocated by Eden in his various messages to the Syrians. It also showed that the British were worried about the possibility of a flare-up in Syria while their troops were there. Both al-Quwätli and Mardam Bey had the impression that the British would no longer exert pressure on Syria for the conclusion of a treaty with France, but they could not judge how the British would react in the event of a clash, nor, specifically, whether they would use their troops to stop the French. On the whole, the Syrians were quite satisfied with their talk with Churchill. They had expected him to apply some kind of pressure on them to show firmer support for France. One thing was clear to the Syrians: they knew what they wanted; the French knew what they wanted, but the British did not know exactly which way to go.

Mardam Bey’s encounter with King Farouk

The Syrian president returned to Syria, but Mardam Bey remained in Cairo to finalise the drafting of the Arab League Charter. This was initialled on 3 March 1945 and signed by all the member states on 22 March 1945. (See Appendix for an appreciation of the Arab League by Jamil Mardam Bey.)

On 3 March King Farouk invited the Arab delegations to a banquet at his palace. As the guests were leaving, the king asked Mardam Bey to stay on. He wanted to know about the situation in Syria in detail and particularly about the present state of Franco-Syrian relations. He also inquired about Syria’s plans for participation in the forthcoming UN founding conference in San Francisco to which Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Yemen were invited, and from which Syria and Lebanon were still excluded. Mardam Bey told the king that his government had already made representations to the Great Powers and it was relying on the Arab participants to exercise as much pressure as possible on them to bring Syria and Lebanon to the conference. The king said that he would use his personal influence with the representatives of the Great Powers in Egypt and that Syria could rely on his support in every way. Mardam Bey asked him to consider the proposition of a united Arab refusal to go to San Francisco as long as Britain and France remained
opposed to Syrian and Lebanese participation. The king promised to discuss the possibility with his government.

On the subject of the United Nations, Mardam Bey informed the king that he intended to ask the Egyptian government to sign the Declaration in Washington on behalf of the Syrian government as no Syrian envoy had yet been appointed to the United States. It impressed the Syrian leaders that King Farouk gave unconditional and wholehearted support to Syria. At no time did he show the slightest hesitation about espousing the Syrian cause. The king was aware that his government was not strong enough to resist British pressure, but that the Egyptian people were solidly behind him on that issue.

**Syria's declaration of war on the Axis**

While Mardam Bey was still in Cairo, President al-Quwatli addressed the Syrian parliament on his return to Damascus. He reported his talks with Churchill and the Arab leaders he had met in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. He then said that Syria had two primary objectives: the attainment of complete independence and the establishment of close ties with the Arab states. He said that all the Arab countries supported Syrian independence and favoured the strengthening of the Arab League. At this point al-Quwatli warned 'all those concerned' that Syria remained attached to its democratic, republican and constitutional regime and declared that the Syrians hoped to realise the project of a Greater Syria, on condition that Syria remained a republic and Damascus the capital of Greater Syria. As for Lebanon, he confirmed Syria's respect for its independence as specified in the Alexandria Protocol. Al-Quwatli thanked all the powers that recognised the unconditional independence of Syria, and added that Syria would not engage any power in any kind of negotiations except on the basis of equality, and that no privileged position would be granted to any state. On the question of the army, he declared that since his return from Egypt, he had met General Beynet twice and that he had the feeling that the general wanted to solve the problem of the Troupes Spéciales. The president reassured parliament that the army would be transferred to Syria, and that the country was eager to participate in the war effort with the Allies in that final phase of the struggle. At this point al-Quwatli announced that his government would table a motion for the declaration of war on the Axis states.

The president's speech was not as well received as he had expected. Although the Chamber almost unanimously carried the motion for the declaration of war, there was puzzlement in people's minds about the
logic of a declaration of war by a country with no army of its own. The motion only served to bring the question of the transfer of the Troupes Spéciales to the fore, and with no progress being made in this respect, tension was bound to rise both inside and outside parliament. The cabinet itself was divided on the issue. Mardam Bey had advised against declaring war, arguing that Syria had been de facto at war with Germany, but his absence from Syria at that time made it easier for the president to elicit the support of the cabinet. Al-Quwatli believed that the declaration of war would entitle Syria to participate in the San Francisco conference. He was therefore deeply disappointed when the British consul in Damascus told him that, ‘on instructions’ of his government, he was to inform him that ‘this action would not entitle Syria to take part in the San Francisco Conference’.

Tension between Syria and Transjordan

The other controversial subject raised by the president concerned his statement about Greater Syria and the conditions he attached to its creation. The subject was by no means a matter of urgency, despite the machinations of Emir Abdullah who engaged in intrigue sometimes with the French and sometimes with the British. It did not warrant causing tension between Syria and its closest neighbour, Transjordan, at a time when Syria was engaged in finalising the draft of the charter of the Arab League in Cairo, and when Mardam Bey was trying hard to mobilise the support of all the Arab countries for the overriding issues of Syria’s complete independence and its immediate demands. Mardam Bey had established a good working relationship with the Transjordanian prime minister, Samir Pasha al-Rifai, in Cairo, and any division in the Arab ranks was clearly detrimental to Syria’s cause. Al-Quwatli, on the other hand, believed that his reference to Greater Syria in the terms used, would reassure Egypt and Saudi Arabia, which did not relish Hashemite dominance. But in making his statement, he upset the Transjordanians, whom General Beynet was trying to woo. Emir Abdullah considered that the president’s declaration was aimed at him personally and was therefore an attack on the Hashemites. Samir Pasha found it necessary to reply with an official speech refuting the Syrian president’s pretensions. The row was exploited by the Hashemite supporters inside Syria, who launched a campaign of vilification against the president and the government.

When Mardam Bey returned to Damascus on 6 March, he found that relations between Syria and Transjordan had deteriorated sharply, and his immediate task was to try to put an end to the war of words that was harming Arab unity. The Syrian government had information that
Transjordan’s consul in Damascus, Abdel Monem al-Rifai, was contact­
ing the opposition and mobilising it in favour of Emir Abdullah. Mardam Bey met Abdel Monem al-Rifai and told him that he had met his brother, Samir Pasha, with whom he had discussed various issues concerning their countries, that he had been impressed by Samir Pasha’s tact and understanding and had much appreciated his sentiments towards Syria during the meetings of the Arab League. Mardam Bey went on to say that both men had agreed on the general policy that should be adopted by all the individual Arab states, namely close cooperation amongst them, full support for any Arab state that had disputes with a foreign power and refraining from creating any problems between them which might have a divisive effect on Arab solidarity. Mardam Bey then said that he was therefore amazed, on his return to Damascus, to witness a propaganda campaign led by supporters of Emir Abdullah against the president and in favour of the creation of a Greater Syria under Hashemite rule. He then added that in view of his understanding with Samir Pasha that both countries should refrain from encouraging divisive actions, he was all the more surprised to learn that his brother, the consul in Damascus, was not a stranger to this propaganda campaign, especially as he (Mardam Bey) held him personally in high esteem and had gone to great lengths to defend him in the cabinet.

Abdel Monem al-Rifai replied that the accusations levelled against him personally were not true and that it was the president’s speech that had triggered the war of words, as his advocacy of a republican regime for Greater Syria was a direct attack on the Hashemites who could not be expected to remain silent. Further diplomatic exchanges ensued.

In Cairo, on the occasion of the signing of the Arab League Pact in March 1945, Mardam Bey and Samir Pasha al-Rifai managed to patch up their countries’ differences. Later, in mid-April, Emir Abdullah’s heir, Emir Talal, was invited to Damascus where he was entertained lavishly. Eventually, with goodwill on both sides, the Syrian and Transjordanian governments agreed to end the war of words and a further decline in relations between them was averted.

US attitude towards Franco-Syrian relations

During February and March, Franco-Syrian relations remained outwardly calm though no solution to the outstanding problems was in sight. The British for their part were strenuously trying to restart negotiations between the French and the Syrians and turned to the Americans for support. The exchange of messages between the Foreign Office and the State Department shows clearly how anxious the British
were to secure American endorsement of their policy in Syria and Lebanon. The Foreign Office repeatedly requested the State Department to instruct Wadsworth to back Shone's efforts by joining him in putting pressure on the Syrian government. The State Department finally agreed to send instructions to its respective envoys in Syria and France to approach the two governments with a request to settle all outstanding issues 'by amicable negotiations'. Wadsworth was to inform the Syrians that the United States was in 'no position to support Syrian and Lebanese governments in refusing to undertake negotiations of any kind with the French.' However, such negotiations for a treaty should be 'non-discriminatory as regards third powers and consistent with their independence' while providing assurances to the French as regards protection of French interests in Syria.

The State Department's instructions to its ambassador in Paris expressed the United States government's concern about a 'potentially explosive situation in the Levant States' which, however, could 'easily be settled in accordance with principles of the Atlantic Charter and United Nations Declaration'. The Americans warned the French that they would regard with 'disfavor the use of military force in the present impasse, either in the form of French-controlled native levies or of French troops'. They added that they saw:

no reason, if it is French intention sincerely to implement independence why they should not agree to the conversion of French representation to status of diplomatic mission or the transfer to local governments of Troupes Spéciales subject only to such offer of supervision as may be considered necessary by the French and military authorities in the theater for the duration of the war in Europe and agreed by Syrian and Lebanese governments, or the provision of reasonable equipment of Lebanese and Syrian Gendarmerie.

The American ambassador was also instructed to tell the French that his government appreciated 'French desire to obtain assurances' regarding the protection of their 'reasonable rights and interests' and that the Levant governments were being 'urged' to change their negative attitude and conclude 'mutually accepted agreements' which would not 'infringe rights and interests of others'. The State Department added that in this connection it had seen a draft of a Convention Universitaire which 'would seriously injure American cultural and educational interests' and would provide France with 'discriminatory privileges'. British persistent appeals for strong backing from the United States for Britain's policy in Syria proved substantially ineffectual because, as it turned out, the United States position was in essence much closer to Syria's than to Britain's.11

The British, having involved themselves in a situation over which
they had no effective control, now chose to extricate themselves from the difficulty without appearing to be letting down either the Syrians or the French. This new policy, or the lack of it, emerged clearly from Churchill’s speech in the House of Commons following his meeting with the Syrian president in Cairo. He declared:

I must make clear once and for all the position of His Majesty’s Government in respect of Syria and Lebanon and in relation to our French Allies. It is governed by the statement made in 1941... We hope it may be possible for France to preserve her special position and that the States may be firmly established by the authority of the World Organisation. However I must make it plain that it is not for us alone to defend by force either Syrian and Lebanese independence or the French privilege... 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.

Churchill’s speech meant that both France and Syria could no longer rely on Britain in solving their problems. By introducing the World Organisation into the subject, Churchill was hinting that the Franco-Syrian question might have to be referred ultimately to the United Nations. Churchill’s speech was seen as objectionable by the Syrians who promptly took to the streets and shouted slogans against Churchill and the British government.

French demands in Syria

Franco-Syrian talks were resumed at the end of February when Beynet met the Syrian president to find a basis for an agreement. Al-Quwati agreed to discuss a revised Convention Universitaire and to conclude Establishment and Consular Conventions with France in accordance with international usage. Beynet asked whether Syria would accept giving preference to Frenchmen in the choice of technical advisers, but received a negative reply. Then the president told Beynet that Syria wanted to take over the Troupes Spéciales en bloc rather than in stages, and that these would have to come under Syrian command, but would be placed at the disposal of the Ninth Army until the end of hostilities in Europe. Beynet said that he was not authorised to make agreements without referring to his government and that he was anyway leaving shortly for Paris to report on the talks and to receive instructions.

While Beynet was having talks with the president, Duff Cooper met Georges Bidault, the French foreign minister, to ask him to speed up the process of Franco-Syrian negotiations. He said that the British and the Syrians had been waiting for the French to state their terms but that
nothing had come. Bidault replied that he could tell him then and there what these were: military bases, a fixed date for the transfer of the army, satisfactory safeguards for France’s cultural interests and a pre-eminent position for the French ambassador. When urged by Duff Cooper to put these terms in writing, Bidault refused on the grounds that he had not received ‘official communication’ from the Syrians and that it was ‘inadmissible’ that the French should state their terms to the British. At a later meeting with Eden, Bidault said that France only wanted a position in Syria such as Britain enjoyed in Iraq, with a military base such as Britain maintained in Habbaniya. He then added that it would not suit British interests in the Near East if France were to clear out altogether. On the question of the Troupes Spéciales, Bidault told Eden that it would be more possible to indicate a date for transfer if the French knew when the British forces would be leaving the Levant.12

On 5 March the first Syrian minister to Paris, Adnan al-Atasi, met Bidault for the first time. Reporting on his meeting, al-Atasi wrote to Mardam Bey that Bidault had expressed his great pleasure at receiving the first-ever envoy of independent Syria and quoted Bidault as saying: ‘I would like to confirm that in our view Syria’s independence is final and would never again be questioned or discussed.’ Al-Atasi thanked Bidault for his assurances and told him that although Syria was a small nation, the Arab world was a large area and that Syria’s independence would therefore serve not only Arab interests but French interests as well. At this point Bidault said that he would like to correct a wrongly held view that France was opposed to Arab unity; all France wanted, he said, was to settle its problems with Syria by means of a treaty, or, if the Syrians preferred, by separate agreements. Al-Atasi replied that Syria did not refuse a treaty because of any unfriendly feelings towards France, but because a treaty would link a much-hated past to the present. Once Syria had gained its complete independence, matters would be different, and international agreements could be concluded with any foreign power, including France. Bidault inquired whether this meant that the Syrian government totally rejected a treaty and, if it did, whether it would be possible to conclude instead a set of special agreements which would safeguard ‘the cultural traditions of France in the Levant’, as well as define future relations between the two countries. Al-Atasi replied that as far as Syria was concerned, its demands were confined to the transfer of the army and to the question of French representation in Syria. Bidault said that the French representation could not form a basis for discussions as long as the British had not only a legation but also an army. He added that he would be prepared to accept all Syria’s demands if agreements were concluded, and reiterated his assurance that such agreements would in no way compromise Syrian independence. To this al-Atasi replied that
his government would be willing to examine French demands when presented, provided, as Bidault had just assured him, that these would not impinge on Syria's independence and sovereignty in any way. Bidault answered: 'We are not “demandeurs”,' adding that he did not know whether they, the French, would present their proposals in the form of a set of agreements, for every time they had done so, they were rejected by Syria; he thought that the best and more practical course to take would be to have talks with the Syrian government first, after he had discussed the situation with Beynet. Al-Atasi concluded his report to his government in Damascus by stating that not once during that meeting had Bidault referred to a pre-eminent position for France. It seemed that Franco-Syrian relations were no longer at breaking-point, but were at a standstill.

Just before leaving for Paris, Beynet, accompanied by Count Ostrorog, called on Jamil Mardam Bey. They discussed the various issues in an amicable way. Beynet promised that upon his return, which would be in a fortnight, he would bring with him proposals for an agreement. Beynet inquired again whether Syria would agree to negotiate a treaty with France, emphasising that all France wanted was to preserve its cultural mission in Syria and Lebanon. Mardam Bey told General Beynet that the draft of the Convention Universitaire was unacceptable as it stood and that, moreover, the American government had objected to it. Beynet said that he would report this to his government and that steps were already being taken for the revision of the existing draft. After the meeting, Beynet made a statement to the press to the effect that there was no conflict between France and Syria, but merely ‘differences of view’ and that the French hoped to reach an agreement on all issues ‘thanks to the goodwill that animates both sides’. As a sign of goodwill Mardam Bey saw Beynet off at Damascus airport.

Syria’s admission to the San Francisco conference

The Syrian government had a very good reason for showing as much goodwill as possible to the French. This show of courtesy was not, as the British imagined, a sign that the Syrians were yielding to British pressure to be more amenable to French demands, but was a deliberate policy, dictated by expedience, of eliciting French support for securing an invitation to the San Francisco conference, particularly as the British had been negative in this regard, claiming French objections. Participation in the conference was the most urgent matter preoccupying the Syrians early in March 1945. The question of Syria’s participation was raised in parliament. The press also took up the matter, pointing
out that many countries which had received invitations to the conference had contributed less to the war effort than Syria and Lebanon, and that the question of participation was a plain test of whether or not the independence of the two countries was a reality. It was freely said in conversation in Syria that it was the British government which was blocking the issue of an invitation to Syria. The Syrian government made representations to Britain, the United States, the Soviet Union and China to support its application to sign the United Nations Declaration and to participate in the conference.

On 10 March the newly appointed Syrian minister in London, Najib al-Armanazi, sent a telegram to Mardam Bey informing him that his talks with the Soviet ambassador in London gave hope for Syrian participation in the conference and added that negotiations on this issue had been undertaken by Washington, Moscow and London. On 13 March the Syrian representative in Cairo, Asem al-Naili, wrote to Mardam Bey that King Farouk had sent one of his aides with an oral message to the Syrian government. As the king wished the message to remain strictly confidential, he sidestepped the usual official channels. The message related that the king had met a highly placed British personality with whom he had raised the question of Syria's participation in the San Francisco conference and had been told that Britain had now 'changed its attitude' which had formerly been prompted by Britain's desire to please France. The king wanted the Syrian government to take note of this development, but to continue nevertheless with its representations and protests as though it had never received his message. At the same time, Mardam Bey received a letter from Paris from Adnan al-Atasi to the effect that French officials had informed him that their government had nothing to do with Syria staying out of the San Francisco conference and that they did not even know why this should be so. Mardam Bey also received a letter from Najib al-Armanazi saying that Spears was leading a campaign in the House of Commons to bring pressure to bear on the British government for the participation of Syria and Lebanon in the conference. Al-Armanazi commented that there seemed to him to be a divergence of views between the Foreign Office and Churchill over policy in Syria. While the Foreign Office believed in aligning British policy to that of France, Churchill did not. There was also a divergence of views over the question of Palestine, al-Armanazi added. While the Foreign Office did not endorse Zionist claims in Palestine, Churchill wholly supported them.

The question of Syria's participation in the San Francisco conference was still unsettled at the time Mardam Bey and Fares al-Khoury went to Cairo to sign the Arab League Pact on 22 March 1945. While in Cairo, they were informed by King Farouk that his ambassador in Moscow had
sent a telegram to the effect that, according to information he had received, 'the question of the invitation of Syria and Lebanon is well on the way'. When they returned to Syria, Wadsworth delivered a note to Mardam Bey on instructions from the State Department, stating that the adherence of Syria and Lebanon to the United Nations Declaration would be accepted, and that on receipt of their respective declarations of adherence, they would be invited to San Francisco. Wadsworth added that these developments must be made absolutely confidential until a public statement had been made.

The State Department informed the British government of this move and added that the American communiqué, when issued, would mention that France had taken the initiative in proposing that the Levant States be invited. By the end of March, Syria and Lebanon had received the invitation to the San Francisco conference.

al-Khouri's second government

On 4 April the Syrian prime minister delivered a speech in parliament in which he said that the primary aim of the Nationalists was to attain independence; this consideration had influenced them in their attitude towards Lebanon, but it was now agreed that a Greater Lebanon which was independent was preferable to a smaller Lebanon under the influence of a foreign power. Al-Khouri declared that they would not negotiate a treaty which would undermine Syrian sovereignty. He then announced the decision of the cabinet to resign on the grounds that the period of Syria's isolation had come to an end following the signing of the Arab League Pact and the invitation to the San Francisco conference; a new stage in the life of the nation had been reached. Al-Khouri had to answer to much criticism of his government which was not considered strong enough to face a crisis situation. In his private notes Mardam Bey commented on the resignation in these words:

_We signed the Arab League Pact on 22 March 1945 in Cairo and returned to Damascus on 27 March. I immediately sensed that a ministerial crisis was apparent everywhere. We were then faced with two important issues: the first was the ratification of the Pact by Parliament and the second was the formation of the delegation to attend the Conference in San Francisco. As Minister for Foreign Affairs, I was responsible for dealing with both. When Fares al-Khouri resigned and the President decided, after consultations, to ask him to form a new government, Fares bey invited me to join the government, but I refused and kept on refusing, not because I wanted the premiership, but because I believed that the forthcoming period would be difficult and decisive between us and the French, requiring a prime minister with special attributes to face..._
up to the situation with force and determination. After much discussion, I accepted to join the government on condition that Fares al-Khouri would go to San Francisco to represent us and that I would be appointed Acting Prime Minister in addition to being Foreign and Defence Minister. On 12 April Fares left for San Francisco and I took over. I knew the problems I would have to face. My first task was to lead the country, foster its devotion to independence and sovereignty and prepare it for resistance; I had to resist the intrigues of the French which were multiplying and obvious; I had to try to put a stop to any agreement or understanding being reached between the French and the British that might be directed against us, a manoeuvre which I had clearly perceived on various occasions. I also had to strengthen our ties with the newly formed Arab League, particularly with our immediate neighbours, but more particularly with Lebanon where the French authorities were trying by various ploys to separate it from the Arab world.

Fares al-Khouri formed his second government on 8 April 1945 with some changes. Mardam Bey was appointed acting prime minister while retaining foreign affairs and defence and there were new faces in the cabinet. Sabri al-Asali was given the ministry of interior, a post of great importance in days to come. Al-Asali, an ardent Arab nationalist, was known in Syria by the nickname of Abu Shujaa (Father of Courage) and had been interned by the Allies for his resistance to occupation. On the day the new Syrian government was formed, Mardam Bey received a telegram from Adnan al-Atasi in Paris informing him that the French ambassador in London, Massigli, was negotiating with the British for the removal of French troops from British command and for the withdrawal of British troops from Syria and Lebanon. This meant that the British were contemplating leaving Syria prior to the settlement of Franco-Syrian problems.

To Mardam Bey this seemed to be an abdication by the British of their commitments and obligations towards Syria. It brought back memories of the British withdrawal of 1920 when King Faisal I was left alone to face a French invasion. Mardam Bey was more acutely aware of such conduct than other members of the government, because he had himself been a member of Faisal's government then and, as under-secretary at the foreign ministry in 1920, had taken part in the negotiations between King Faisal and the French and British. Mardam Bey's mistrust of the British was not without justification and, judging by the Foreign Office reports of the time, the British mistrusted him too. Thus the British, as evidenced by the Foreign Office reports, tried whenever possible to bypass Mardam Bey. They would try to talk directly with the president or the prime minister, but these attempts failed as neither the president nor the prime minister was in a position, either constitutionally or in practice, to take unilateral decisions. The
British seemed to think that both Shukri al-Quwatli and Fares al-Khoury were more anti-French than Jamil Mardam Bey and Saadallah al-Jabri and therefore relatively more pro-British. In the case of al-Khoury, the French for their part had always considered him an anglophile because he was a Protestant and had an Anglo-Saxon education. It is precisely labels such as these which have bedevilled both British and French policy in Syria and probably in other parts of the world.

Shone wrote to Eden on 12 April that he had gone to see Fares al-Khoury before the latter’s departure for San Francisco saying:

Syrian Prime Minister who has always hitherto struck me as strongly opposed to concessions to the French seemed to be more reasonable and hopeful... He was looking forward greatly to meeting you at San Francisco and hoped I would recommend him favourably to you... He is well disposed to us and is I believe receptive to our advice. Prime Minister appeared to think that French were now generally inclined to be more reasonable... He emphasised the importance which Syrian government attached to the handing over of Troupes Spéciales and he believed the French might agree to this if they could secure a French military mission... Prime Minister said that provided French proposals and attitude in general were reasonable a French military mission might be a small price to pay for the handing over of the Troupes Spéciales. He appeared to have more hope than the mercurial Minister of Foreign Affairs that the French were now alive to the realities of the situation here and would show themselves moderate and conciliatory.

On his meeting with Mardam Bey immediately following his conversation with the prime minister, Shone reported that he was shown Adnan al-Atasi’s telegram concerning the withdrawal of British troops and that Mardam Bey was ‘clearly perturbed and said he believed it was the sequel to the old story’. Shone added that he suggested to Mardam Bey that the ‘atmosphere’ for Franco-Syrian relations was ‘more favourable’ than for a long time past but was told by Mardam Bey that he did not believe that the ‘French mentality had really changed’ and that he knew the French well, that they were excitable and capable of such acts as the arrest of members of the Lebanese government and could do the same in Syria. Mardam Bey asked Shone to inform his government that if it decided to withdraw its forces from the area, it should impose on the French the condition that the Troupes Spéciales be handed over to the Syrians forthwith.13

Shone also saw the President al-Quwatli to find out whether he was willing to consider a French military mission in exchange for the Troupes Spéciales, but al-Quwatli refused to commit himself. Taking the opportunity, Shone told him that although ‘it was no part of his business to interfere in Syria’s internal affairs’, he was speaking as a friend. He said that during a recent tour of part of Syria, he ‘sensed the
feeling' that the government was 'too much in the hands of Damascenes', that it would be wise to appoint a Druze and an Alawite minister in the cabinet and that Aleppo should also be represented, adding that according to his information, the Druze leaders 'were disgruntled with the government'. The president, according to Shone, took these remarks 'in good part', but refuted Shone's allegations by informing him that Sultan al-Atrash had just sent him a message telling him 'to pay no attention to demands for representation in the Cabinet', that Aleppo was indeed represented by both Naim Antaki, a Christian, and Hikmat al-Hakim. Al-Quwatli added that until the French stopped their intrigues in the Alawite region and withdrew their forces, there was very little he could do for them and that members of any cabinet must be limited and that the best men must be chosen 'wherever they could be found'. Al-Quwatli then informed his government of his conversation with Shone, and Mardam Bey warned his colleagues and the president that the British might try to use their well-known policy of divide and rule and that everyone should be on his guard in this respect.

Fearing an Anglo-French understanding whereby British forces would evacuate Syria, thus leaving the country exposed to a French take-over, Mardam Bey called in George Wadsworth and expressed his concern over this latest development. He told him that if British troops were to withdraw then all French troops should go too, with the Troupes Spéciales being transferred to Syria. He informed Wadsworth that he had instructed Constantine Zuraiq, the Syrian representative in Washington, to address a note to the State Department on the subject. The note informed the United States government that it had come to the attention of the Syrian government that negotiations had been opened between Britain and France 'with a view to the separation of the French army in Syria from the Allied Middle East Command and the withdrawal of the British forces from the Syrian territory'. The note stated: 'Prior to any decision in this matter, it is necessary to transfer the immediate command of the forces in Syria which are now under French command to the Syrian government. The so-called French army in Syria is predominantly composed of Syrian nationals.' The State Department replied that the views of the Syrian government 'on this problem have been carefully noted' and that the American government had urged the French 'to take steps to meet the reasonable desire' of the Syrians concerning the transfer of the Troupes Spéciales, 'subject only to such overall supervision by the French and British military authorities in the Theater as may be considered necessary by these authorities for the duration of the war in Europe and accepted by' the Syrian government. The American reply also stated that their attitude 'in the matter' had been made known to the British.
On 15 April Adnan al-Atasi cabled from Paris that Bidault had asked him to beg the Syrian government to empower its delegation at San Francisco to negotiate the settlement of all pending issues with him. As al-Atasi's messages from Paris were coming in, the Syrian government was still waiting for General Beynet's return to Damascus with his government's proposals. He had promised to be back within two weeks but more than six weeks had by then elapsed. French behaviour seemed strange. More ominous was the news brought to Mardam Bey by Lépissier, an official at the French Délégation Générale, who in an eccentric way was personally devoted to Mardam Bey. He often passed information to Mardam Bey about the French authorities in Syria, whom he accused of being penetrated by fascists. Just three days after al-Atasi's telegram arrived, Lépissier called on Mardam Bey early in the morning at home to tell him to beware of the French military authorities in Syria, not to trust them nor to believe what they said, and that they were preparing some sort of coup against the Syrian government because these people were not convinced that Syria's independence was a reality.

More clouds gathered when al-Atasi reported to Mardam Bey that at a meeting with Bidault and Beynet, the latter had made it clear that the question of the transfer of the army could not be settled, claiming, yet again, that the agreement that Mardam Bey had allegedly made with the British in June 1944 (according to the Palestine Post) could not allow this. Mardam Bey realised as soon as he received all this information that a clash with France was inevitable and that if it had to happen, the sooner the better, while British troops were still in Syria, and while the United Nations were assembled in San Francisco. He reasoned that if the French were still using the flimsy and unsubstantiated allegation of a Syrian agreement with the British as a major reason for not handing over the army, despite his public and private denials, the situation could no longer be handled by diplomatic means but only by force. In addition, Mardam Bey was receiving information that Oliva-Roget's assistant, Colonel Massey, was trying to mobilise Syrian agents in the Midan quarter of Damascus and that he had been distributing money and guns. Massey was also holding meetings with well-known French stooges like Safuh al-Muayyad, who during Vichy rule had collaborated with the French to discredit the Nationalists. A report by Syrian intelligence said that al-Muayyad was heard saying that the new year would see the return of General Collet to Damascus, that the present order was doomed and that the country would go back to the old days. Safuh al-Muayyad had even begun to recruit members of the gendarmerie, where he had contacts by virtue of his former post as head of the local police during the Vichy period.

Reports were also coming in from all over Syria to the effect that the
French were trying to re-establish their authority in all major areas in the country. In the Alawite region they were backing a group led by Sulayman al-Murshid which had rebelled against the central government. In Aleppo they took over the frontier post at the border with Turkey and refused passage to Syrians holding valid travel permits issued by the Syrian authorities. They distributed arms to their supporters; they deliberately provoked the local police forces while they were on duty; they tried to recruit fighting men from amongst the Kurds and the Alawites. In short, all the indications were that the French were preparing for some sort of belligerent action.

Meanwhile, on the diplomatic level, they appeared conciliatory, notwithstanding their harsh utterances at their meetings with Adnan al-Atasi in Paris. For instance, at a meeting with Mardam Bey on 19 April, Count Ostrorog expressed France's willingness to negotiate an overall settlement if only the Syrians would agree to signing the revised text of the Convention Universitaire. Mardam Bey then asked when General Beynet was expected back in Syria, to which Ostrorog replied that the general was delayed because of his desire to make sure of bringing with him proposals acceptable to the Syrians, and advised that, in the meantime, the French government would be greatly encouraged if the Syrians were to conclude the cultural agreement, the only demand the French insisted upon. Mardam Bey replied that his government would carefully examine the revised draft and had in fact formed a committee of Syrian experts for that purpose and that the French would be informed of the committee's conclusions as soon as it was ready. However, Mardam Bey made the point that his government would not sign a convention with France which it could not sign with any other power.

Immediately after his conversation with Ostrorog, Mardam Bey left for Shtaura in Lebanon to meet the Lebanese prime minister, Abdel Hamid Karameh, and informed him of the latest developments in Syria and of the new draft of the cultural convention which he thought to be unacceptable at first sight, but which the Syrians promised to study and introduce amendments to as appropriate. He told Karameh that he would probably receive a similar draft and asked him not to take any decision on it before consulting the Syrians, to which the Lebanese premier agreed. The cultural convention had become a national issue for France as much as the transfer of the army had become a national issue for Syria.
NOTES

1. FO 371/40347, 20 December 1944.
2. FO 371/40346, 1 January 1945.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 26 January 1945.
7. PO 371/45590, 30 January 1945.
8. PO 371/45557, 29 January 1945.
10. PO 371/45557, 28 January 1945.
11. PO 371/45553, 16 March 1945.
13. PO 371/45562, 12 April 1945.
An incident of particular significance occurred during April 1945 when two Druze detachments were dispatched by the French military command to the Alawite region. On arrival in Homs, one of the detachments refused to continue the journey fearing that it might be required to engage the Syrian gendarmerie. The French disarmed the detachment and at first stated that they had dismissed the men, but later claimed that they had dispersed them. In fact, the men made their way back to Damascus and were met by the Mohafez of Jabal Druze who promised that they would be enlisted in the Syrian gendarmerie. The French immediately requested the government not to enlist them and promised that, in return, they would not charge them with desertion. The men, who had been jeered by villagers and townspeople whilst *en route* to the Alawite region, were now welcomed by the people with open arms.

On 25 April Mardam Bey called Ostrorog and expressed the government’s concern at General Beynet’s long delay in Paris and made a formal demand for the withdrawal of French troops from the Alawite region on the grounds that the Syrian government was responsible for maintaining law and order. He said that when the withdrawal had been effected, he would himself head a commission for the settlement of the problem with Sulayman al-Murshid, who, incidentally, had been elected deputy on the National Bloc ticket in 1936. Two days later demonstrations broke out again in Damascus demanding the formation of a national army. Thereupon the government decided to employ the men of the Druze detachment as watchmen in different parts of the country.

During that week, news came that the French wished to move three battalions from North Africa and France to Syria and Lebanon to ‘relieve and reinforce’ the French troops stationed there. The British commander-in-chief, Middle East forces, informed General Humblot that according to the Lyttelton–de Gaulle Agreement, it was up to him to decide on the needs of the different armies under his command and that ‘he was not prepared to authorise any increase in French forces in the Levant States
at this time'. He stated: 'If the battalions in question were intended as a relief, he did not wish that the actual relief should take place in the Levant States. The actual exchange should take place in Alexandria or some other port.' As the matter took a serious tone, Duff Cooper was instructed to take it up with General de Gaulle.¹

At the meeting of the two men, General de Gaulle said that he did not understand why the matter should concern the British since there was no longer a German menace in the Middle East, adding that as long as the British government maintained forces there, he was not prepared to reduce the number of French forces, nor would he be expected to hand over the Troupes Spéciales. He added that he intended to send in three battalions and withdraw one and that he did not think that there was any danger of disorder as the British feared, and that disorder would only occur if the British provoked it. When Duff Cooper's representations failed, Churchill sent a personal message to de Gaulle deprecating de Gaulle's approach to the question as one of prestige and urged him to take account of Britain's keen interest in the security of the Middle East. To allay General de Gaulle's suspicion, Churchill offered to withdraw all British troops as soon as a treaty between France and Syria was concluded, urging that reinforcements should not be sent. De Gaulle replied that he would not give an assurance in regard to French reinforcements and stated that France was prepared to allow Syria and Lebanon full self-government, but that he required a military base there. He added that General Beynet would shortly return to Syria to make a public announcement to that effect. He also proposed to discuss the whole question of the Middle East with Churchill, invoking the Soviet menace, which, he asserted, made it necessary for the British and the French to take a common line in the Middle East.²

Dispatch of French reinforcements to the Levant

On receiving Churchill's message, de Gaulle instructed the minister of the navy urgently to send 'the reinforcements destined for the Levant' and specified that the transport was to be 'effected by cruiser' and that this should 'go directly from a French port to a French port (Bizerta to Beirut) and not pass through Alexandria'.³ On 6 May the French presidency issued a communiqué stating that General de Gaulle had received General Beynet and given him instructions for his future negotiations with the Syrian and Lebanese governments: 'The negotiations aim at concluding treaties, which will regulate, on the one hand, the outstanding questions which have arisen from the substitution of the regime of the French Mandate for that of independence as well as
ensuring the cultural, economic and strategic interests of France, on the other. The die was cast, and Mardam Bey's fears, which he had repeatedly expressed to the British and the Americans, were now being realised. An armed clash between France and Syria was imminent. In expectation of a clash, the Syrian government had to prepare itself and the country for resistance.

On 5 May the first French battalion reached Beirut; 900 Senegalese disembarked and a smaller number of North African troops embarked. The significance of the departure of North African troops did not escape the Syrian government. It was another sign that France was preparing a military take-over as Arab Muslim troops from North Africa could not be relied upon. On 6 May the Syrian government delivered a note of protest to the French warning against further reinforcements. The Lebanese government did likewise. Mardam Bey also sent a note to the British government requesting that in view of the fact that the war in Europe had ended, Syria's consent be sought before foreign troops entered Syria. The Lebanese foreign minister, Henri Pharaon, also presented a similar note. Mardam Bey asked Najib al-Armanazi in London to approach the Foreign Office and ask it to use its influence with the French to prevent them sending further reinforcements. Al-Armanazi replied that the Foreign Office expressed its concern but said that the British government was unable to intervene physically to prevent such reinforcements since the French had regained full command of their armed and naval forces. Mardam Bey called George Young, the British consul in Damascus, and told him that the situation was deteriorating rapidly, that parliament and public opinion were restive, and that demonstrations would probably break out again. He added that if British brokerage was viewed with suspicion by the French and so proved ineffectual, even counter-productive, Syria might have to turn for support to the United States or the Soviet Union in the future.

The dispatch of French troops to Syria and Lebanon alarmed the United States government which expressed, through its ambassador in Paris, America's earnest hope that troops in the Levant would not be increased, as such an increase would be potentially detrimental to peace and security in that area. In Damascus, Wadsworth met Mardam Bey and appeared to agree with the Syrian point of view that the French were in an aggressive mood, and also agreed that the Syrians had a right to ask the Allies to consult them before sending out or stationing troops on their territory. Wadsworth told Mardam Bey that his government did not agree to cultural privileges being granted to France, which the United States could not enjoy, or that precedence be given to the French ambassador over other envoys or to the maintenance of naval, air and military bases by France, unless granted willingly by Syria.
and Lebanon. Mardam Bey told Wadsworth that the only danger to security in Syria was the French themselves, that by deliberately obstructing the delivery of arms to the gendarmerie they were provoking trouble. Mardam Bey said further that the arrival of 900 Senegalese troops without French assurances that an equal number of troops would be sent out, was a French manoeuvre to reinforce their garrison because they were convinced that the Troupes Spéciales could no longer be relied upon. He added that it was astonishing that the French had taken this action before Beynet's return, at a moment when Syrians were negotiating with them on the subject of a cultural convention and whilst the Syrian prime minister was having talks with Bidault in San Francisco. Wadsworth replied that his government was aware of this, and that the Syrian prime minister should protest to the foreign ministers of the United States, Britain and France, respectively.

All these developments were taking place while Beynet was still in Paris. Finally, on 12 May, he returned to Beirut and made his first contact with the Lebanese government on 14 May, when he met Henri Pharaon, the foreign minister, to inform him that a French ship carrying reinforcements was about to sail from Tunis. Pharaon told him that unless an equivalent number of troops was withdrawn, the Lebanese government, which was in full agreement with the Syrian government, would break off negotiations with the French side. Beynet said he would send a telegram to Paris to this effect, but doubted that he could stop the reinforcements from arriving. The meeting was cut short and the French proposals were not even discussed. Pharaon immediately contacted Mardam Bey and both agreed to meet the following day to adopt a common action. By then the temperature in Syria, particularly in Damascus, had risen to a dangerous degree. On 13 May a bomb was thrown at the parliament building in Damascus; demonstrations erupted the following day and the city was closed. Parliament met that day and unanimously passed a law 'for the protection of independence'. The law provided for severe penalties for any person who appealed to religious, communal, racial or regional sentiments with the object of destroying national unity; anyone creating or taking part in provocation or disturbances at the instigation of a foreign power or spying for such a power would be liable to the death penalty. Syrians in the service of a foreign power, either in Syria or outside, who would not conform to a request by their government to leave that service within a specified period of time, would be deprived of their nationality and their property would be seized. This last provision gave the government the means by which it could apply direct pressure on the Troupes Spéciales under French command.

Mardam Bey and Pharaon met on 15 May and agreed to take whatever circumstantial measures they deemed necessary as soon as
Beynet had contacted the Syrian government, which he had not then done. Mardam Bey was of the opinion that Beynet would contact him only after new French troops had arrived. That same evening Mardam Bey summoned the British consul, George Young, and asked him whether the commander-in-chief knew when these reinforcements were due to arrive (as Beynet had not given Pharaon a date). He informed him that the Syrian government would break off negotiations, perhaps even diplomatic relations, with France, and would protest to both the French and British governments and call on them to remove their troops from the country forthwith. The British consul then asked what would happen if a ship were to arrive. Mardam Bey replied that there would be 'serious popular agitation' and gave the strong impression that his government would 'not try to check it'. As for the negotiations with the French, Mardam Bey said he was absolutely sure that the French would not make proposals which the Syrians could consider and added that the Convention Universitaire as it stood was unacceptable, but that the cabinet was meeting to consider a counter-draft.

Wadsworth was instructed to see President al-Quwatli and Mardam Bey together. At the meeting Mardam Bey told Wadsworth that unless the French withdrew the same number of troops as those due to arrive, the Syrian government would break off negotiations with the French and would not be able to prevent widespread anti-French demonstrations and boycott. Clashes might be unavoidable, he added. Wadsworth replied that if French reinforcements were sent in spite of his government's warning, the United States no doubt would wish to consider taking some 'correction action' but that it was essential to give the United States government time for such a purpose. Al-Quwatli asked Wadsworth what would happen if the French presented the Syrians with a fait accompli? 'Was Syria to become another Poland?' Was he not entitled to look to the Great Powers for support in accordance with the principles which they had solemnly laid down, he asked. Wadsworth promised to inform his government immediately.

The French delegation in Damascus contacted Mardam Bey on 15 May to inform him that Édouard Herriot, the former president of the French national assembly, was arriving in Damascus the following day accompanied by Beynet, and that he would like to see him and the president. Mardam Bey accepted to lunch with Herriot at the French residence and invited him to dine with the president the same evening. The first encounter between Beynet and Mardam Bey since Beynet's return was at lunch on 16 May. It was a social event at which the ladies were present, and no mention of French proposals was made. Mardam Bey had a high regard for Herriot, with whom he had established friendly relations during the negotiations of the 1936 treaty, and
believed that he could rely on Herriot to convey to the French government the views of the Syrians regarding the dangerous policy that the French were pursuing. At dinner at the presidency, attended on the Syrian side only by Mardam Bey and Saadallah al-Jabri besides al-Quwatli, the Syrians held frank talks with Herriot, who told them that he had received a biased picture of the local situation from the French authorities in Syria and admitted that Franco-Syrian relations were obviously very bad because of the 'new elements' that had appeared, which the Syrian side took to mean the British presence. No reference was made at the dinner to the new French proposals which Beynet had brought with him, despite Beynet's presence. The Syrians were determined not to bring up the subject of Franco-Syrian negotiations unless they were officially approached by the French.

In between lunch and dinner, Shone saw Mardam Bey and informed him that the arrival of French troops was imminent and that they would disembark despite strong British and American representations in Paris, but reminded him of Churchill's statement in the House of Commons that it was not for Britain to defend by force either Syrian independence or the French position. Mardam Bey made some harsh remarks about British policy and reminded Shone of the bad impression Churchill's statement had made on the Syrian people. He pointed out that Churchill did not seem to be aware of the fact that Britain's position in Syria was unlike that of any other power; for a start Britain was responsible for bringing the French back in 1941, when 'liberating' Syria from Vichy rule; it guaranteed Syria's independence when Arab help was needed; it had a special position in the Arab world and, significantly, the Ninth Army was stationed on Syrian soil. Mardam Bey then said that the British could therefore not shrug off their responsibilities, but if they did they would be re-creating the situation which had led to the tragic events of 1920 when the Syrians were left to face the French military might alone.

In reporting his conversation with Mardam Bey, and the situation in Syria, to the Foreign Office, Shone mentioned that Mardam Bey was 'less cordial than usual' and that the president was 'gravely concerned about our attitude'. Shone related that the Syrians were losing confidence in Britain and that they 'would not be likely any longer to inform' Britain of their intentions or 'accept' British advice, and that anyway it would be 'useless' to urge the Syrian government to negotiate under threat of force. Shone added that public opinion was 'veering against' Britain and the population believed that Britain could have stopped French reinforcements if it had wished to do so. Shone concluded his message by saying: 'Frankly I do not see how Commander-in-Chief can undertake to keep local population in check except by threats of use of force. And even that might not deter Syrians
France makes fresh demands

On 17 May French troops landed in Beirut. On the same day Beynet paid Mardam Bey a courtesy visit and asked for a meeting to be arranged with him as soon as possible in order to discuss the proposals that he had brought with him from Paris. Mardam Bey told him that he would see him and Ostrorog the following morning. He asked Beynet whether he had authority from his government to negotiate, or simply to put forward proposals and report back to Paris. He was amazed when Beynet told him that he was only an 'intermediary'. The visit over, Mardam Bey called Pharaon and asked him to be present at the talks with the French. Pharaon came to Damascus that same evening and had a long meeting with Mardam Bey and al-Quwatli when both sides agreed to take a common line in their negotiations with the French.

On 18 May the meeting between the Syrians, the Lebanese and the French took place amid demonstrations in various parts of Syria held in protest against the arrival of French troops and calling for the immediate creation of a national army. All major towns were on strike. The French side was represented by General Beynet and Count Ostrorog, but Oliva-Roget, who had just been promoted to the rank of general, was excluded though he was the official French representative in Damascus. Oliva-Roget had been barred from making any contact with the Syrians since December 1944 at the formal request of the Syrian government. The meeting lasted only 45 minutes. When Mardam Bey inquired whether Beynet had brought with him 'a text concerning the negotiations that will take place', Beynet submitted a copy of an aide-mémoire to Mardam Bey and Pharaon. This contained a general reference to France's demands in Syria and Lebanon; it did not specify any of these demands in detail, and the general tone was that of an ultimatum, timed to coincide with the arrival of the French reinforcements. It was ironical that these French reinforcements should have been carried by the ship, Jeanne d'Arc, an ominous coincidence for the French in view of the presence of British forces in Syria and Lebanon.

The French aide-mémoire emphasised that the first gesture of goodwill to Syria and Lebanon was made by the Free French when they
proclaimed the independence of these countries in 1941 and that as a result of this gesture, independence had been attained. It went on to say: ‘It is in this spirit and without any reservation about that independence that the French government wishes to ensure the defence of the essential interests that France still holds... These interests are cultural, economic and strategic. The cultural considerations will be defined and guaranteed by a Convention Universitaire. The economic considerations by various accords. As for the strategic considerations, these will consist of bases which will safeguard the means of communications of France with her overseas possessions.’ It concluded that once the above conditions had been met, the French government would agree to transfer the Troupes Spéciales to the national governments ‘with the reservation’ that these troops remain under French high command as long as ‘circumstances did not permit the full exercise of a national command’. In short, what had been expected to be fresh proposals for negotiations, turned out to be virtually a statement confirming France’s adherence to the former principle of military occupation for an indeterminate period. The first paragraph of the aide-mémoire was constructed in such a way as to suggest that it was purely out of French goodwill that Syria and Lebanon were proclaimed independent, disregarding, by omission, the British guarantee of 1941 as well as the struggle of the Syrian Nationalists during the previous 25 years. The document was so peremptory in form and content that it could be perceived only as an ultimatum.

On seeing this document both, Mardam Bey and Pharaon told Beynet that it provided no grounds for discussion and thereupon turned their attention to the question of reinforcements about which they strongly protested. Pharaon pointed out that from a juridical point of view the arrival of troops was incompatible ‘with the status of sovereignty of Syria and Lebanon’. Beynet replied that ‘in present circumstances, the juridical point of view of the Syrian and Lebanese governments is open to discussion’ and remarked that even if the recently arrived French battalion were added to those already stationed in the Levant, the French would have only five battalions whereas the British troops were estimated at 11 battalions. Mardam Bey warned that these ventures would have serious and far-reaching repercussions and added that Syrian efforts to create a favourable atmosphere for negotiations had been thwarted and negotiations compromised. Both he and Pharaon then told Beynet that there was no point in prolonging the meeting and that he would hear from them as soon as they had consulted their respective governments.

Immediately after the meeting, Mardam Bey and Pharaon went to report to the Syrian president who then contacted the Lebanese
President and arranged for a meeting between them and members of their respective governments the following day at Shtaura. In the afternoon the Syrian cabinet headed by al-Quwatli decided to break off negotiations with the French and prepare the country for a showdown which seemed imminent. Following the cabinet meeting, Mardam Bey asked the deputies representing various regions to come to see him. He informed them of the crisis facing the country and asked them to go back immediately to their constituencies and prepare the population for any eventuality. He also sent urgent messages to all the Mohafezin (governors) instructing them to put the local police on alert in readiness for any French provocation and to take measures against any person suspected of collaboration with the local French authorities against the central government.

Mardam Bey then met Wadsworth and the British consul and informed them of the French demands which, he said, Syria could not even discuss, let alone accept. He explained to Wadsworth that the French aide-mémoire contained new conditions which had not previously been mentioned by any French representative. Shone sent a message to the Foreign Office informing it that troubles were imminent and that in his opinion ‘recent developments have proved conclusively’ that British policy in Syria which virtually amounted to assisting the French to secure a privileged position simply would not work. Shone added that the British position ‘was already weakened’ and that ‘most people’ were beginning to think either that the British ‘were selling to the French’ or that they were ‘too irresolute to be of any good to them’. Shone complained: ‘Our present line is neither helping the French, nor gaining their goodwill and it is rapidly destroying in these countries our power to help them or ourselves. It is putting our commanders in a ludicrous situation and my own position is daily becoming more difficult.’

Syria prepares for resistance

On 19 May the Syrian and Lebanese presidents and heads of government met at Shtaura. The meeting lasted four hours during which Franco-Syrian and Franco-Lebanese relations were fully examined together with the latest French aide-mémoire. They decided that neither side would enter into talks with the French without prior consultation with the other. The Syrians told the Lebanese that they were determined to take over the command of the Troupes Spéciales and that the latest law passed by the Syrian parliament on 14 May was a step in that direction, and urged the Lebanese to follow suit whenever circumstances permitted. Both sides agreed to draft memoranda addressed
to the heads of the Arab states and the Great Powers informing them of the latest developments; the texts of the memoranda were to be identical so as to impress on the Great Powers that Syria and Lebanon were firmly united. At the end of the meeting, a communiqué was issued, stating that discussions took place concerning the dispatch of new French forces to Syria and Lebanon without prior approval of the States and in defiance of the States' requirements of which the French authorities had been formally notified. The communiqué also referred to the discussions between the two governments regarding the French aide-mémoire. It read:

The representatives of the Syrian and Lebanese governments consider the disembarkation of troops in the manner that it occurred as constituting an infringement of the sovereignty of the two States and they regard the French aide-mémoire as containing proposals which are in direct contradiction with the spirit of independence. Therefore the Syrian and Lebanese sides have agreed not to enter into negotiations with the French side and hereby blame the French government for the consequences. They have also agreed to unify their efforts to defend the sovereignty and independence of their respective countries.

That same evening al-Quwatli was taken seriously ill on his return to Damascus. His physician diagnosed a recurrence of an ulcer perforation which had threatened his life a year earlier. Throughout the night al-Quwatli suffered from internal bleeding and called Mardam Bey to his bedside and told him with tears in his eyes: 'Jamil, I depend on you completely. If I do not pull through, the entire responsibility for the country will fall on your shoulders and I am confident that you are capable of facing up to it. I hereby authorise you to deputise for me in all matters.' Mardam Bey assured the president that events were taking a favourable turn and asked him not to worry and to concentrate on getting well. He then called on a team of doctors from Beirut and asked the British authorities to provide all the medical help at their disposal, which they did.

News of the president's serious condition coinciding as it did with the Syro-Lebanese communiqué, raised tension in Syria such as had not been seen for a long time. Demonstrations on a large scale took place everywhere in the country particularly in the capital. The demonstrations were orderly because the demonstrators were aware of the gravity of the situation. At the same time, they expressed their determination to resist by any means any French assault on their country's independence. Mardam Bey's immediate task was to take measures to prevent the situation from getting out of control, especially as he knew that the French were inciting their agents to cause the sort
of trouble that would invite French military intervention. He knew, too, that in certain regions the French were actively trying to encourage separatist movements by arming rebellious elements to oppose the central government. Fortunately for the country, the vast majority of Syrians were familiar with French machinations and stood solidly behind the national government. Mardam Bey's task was made easier by the steadfastness of the minister of the interior, Sabri al-Asali, who showed dedication, courage and energy. He kept the internal situation under control, preventing it from falling into chaos. It was also fortunate that Saadallah al-Jabri was the president of the Chamber and was able to prevent a number of deputies from playing into French hands.

On the evening of 20 May Mardam Bey invited the foreign representatives in Damascus and delivered to them a memorandum which the Syrian government had prepared on the latest Franco-Syrian impasse. He also delivered a note to Beynet in reply to the French aide-mémoire. It stated that the government had tried very hard to create a calm atmosphere to help to solve the outstanding problems between France and Syria, but was regrettably hindered by the provocative acts of certain French military elements. The note affirmed that the Syrian government considered the landing of fresh troops as an act 'incompatible' with Syria's independence, a deliberate infringement of its sovereignty which it could not accept, a point the Syrian government had made earlier in its note of 6 May. It also stated that the French aide-mémoire of 18 May consisted of a new set of demands, which had never been mentioned before, and that therefore the Syrian government was unable to enter into negotiations on the basis of that document. The note concluded by demanding the 'withdrawal of all foreign troops from its territories and the transfer of the Troupes Spéciales at the earliest time'.

The Syrian note to the Arab states referred to both the French aide-mémoire and the Syrian reply to it. It emphasised that as the French proposals were in direct conflict with Syrian independence, they were unacceptable, and that consequently negotiations with the French were broken off. It confirmed that the Syrian government had demanded the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Syria. The note concluded by expressing the government's intention of calling a meeting of the Arab League Council to discuss developments in Syria and the necessary steps to be taken in support of Syria.

The Syrian note to the British, American and Soviet ministers was accompanied by a copy of the French aide-mémoire and the Syrian reply to it. The note stated: 'The Syrian government believes that it must reaffirm the position it had taken on what concerns foreign troops, whose entry and passage on its territory cannot take place without prior consultation.' It claimed that the Syrian government had 'deployed great
efforts to maintain calm in order to create a favourable climate for conversations with the French authorities. It regrets to observe that no corresponding dispositions were taken by the French side and that on the contrary we recently observed a recrudescence of incidents of a provocative character, that could have had extremely dire consequences had not the government taken the necessary measures to calm public opinion. The note then referred to the latest talks between the Syrian, Lebanese and French sides and to the French aide-mémoire which not only ‘subordinated’ the transfer of the Troupes Spéciales to various accords and conventions but also maintained that they would be kept under French command for an indeterminate period, from which the Syrian government could not fail to ‘logically conclude that, far from being necessary for military needs, the entry of French troops into Lebanon and Syria was manifestly designed to exercise pressure on both governments’.

The note to Shone said that the Syrian government was in no doubt that the British government would accept its point of view and that it could ‘expect the most effective aid’. The note to the Soviets stated that the Syrians were certain that they could count on the generous support of the Soviet Union.

The note to the Americans was much longer than that of the British and Soviets and referred to the correspondence between the Syrian president and the late President Roosevelt and emphasised Syria’s conviction that it had remained faithful to the principles of the Atlantic Charter by deploying ‘the most ardent efforts’ to maintain calm; it said that Syria had heeded the advice of the American government to settle its problems through negotiations, but that the latest French proposals could not be considered as forming a basis for an ‘acceptable treaty’, as suggested unofficially by the United States government on 7 March 1945. The note reminded the Americans of their own statement, namely that they considered ‘unfavourably any use of force’ by the French government to solve the pending problems.

After receiving the Syrian and Lebanese notes, Shone, together with General Paget, met Beynet on 20 May. Beynet seemed more perturbed than previously on account of the news from Aleppo that three French soldiers had been killed. He told Shone that although the situation was ‘not at all comfortable’, it was ‘not tragic’, adding that if the president, who was seriously ill, were to die, the French might have a ‘few days of calm’ and advised the British to have enough troops and aircraft in readiness to deal with any ‘ennui’ likely to arise in Iraq and Egypt. Beynet mentioned the possibility of a ‘surgical operation’ if necessary. Paget’s and Shone’s impression was that the French were not to be deflected from a policy that was bound to end in a clash and informed their government to that effect.6
From 20 May onwards and for the next ten days, it became a daily routine for Mardam Bey to address large crowds of demonstrators that gathered at the Serail, protesting against France and supporting the government's firm stand. On 21 May Mardam Bey together with al-Jabri, met Shone and Paget and asked them what the British attitude would be in the event of the situation deteriorating further. Both Shone and Paget said that their government was impressing on the French the need to avoid causing provocation and hoped that the Syrian government would similarly avoid a clash. Mardam Bey and al-Jabri were in no mood to be preached at and simply wanted to know whether the French reinforcements had come with British permission and whether the British command would stop further reinforcements. Paget replied that the British had tried to dissuade the French from sending fresh troops, but to no avail. At this point Mardam Bey told him that he would like French troops to be removed from all Syrian towns, and Paget promised to ask Beynet to see to it that this was done. Al-Jabri warned that the Chamber could no longer be restrained, and Mardam Bey added that the Syrians had the support of all the Arab states and that demonstrations had already taken place in Amman and Baghdad. He asked why, if the British wanted the Syrian government to maintain order, did they not release the arms which had been requested for the gendarmerie, adding that the population was better armed than the police. He also hinted that, since the French refused to transfer the Troupes Spéciales, the government would have no alternative but to recall those troops in accordance with the Law of National Independence passed on 14 May by parliament. In fact earlier that day, Mardam Bey had seen Colonel Abdallah Atfa, an experienced officer in the Arab army and had discussed with him plans for the recall of the Troupes Spéciales and the formation of a national army.

On that same day Mardam Bey addressed the Chamber. He made a long and frank survey of Franco-Syrian relations since 1920 and explained the circumstances in which the Syrian and Lebanese governments decided to break off negotiations with the French. He read out the text of the French aide-mémoire and the Syrian reply to it, and concluded by saying: 'I hereby declare frankly and unequivocally that our plan will undergo no change or modification; that plan is for the evacuation of all foreign troops. We will not sign a treaty or an agreement that may limit our independence or sovereignty and we will not grant any country a privileged position.'

On 22 May Mardam Bey received a coded telegram from the Syrian minister in Iraq saying: 'Ten thousand rifles are ready. Name the persons and the place suitable for receiving them.' The Iraqi government was
supporting Syria, not only by words of protest but also by sending arms. It was a very significant step in inter-Arab relations, and a tangible indication that the French and even the British would have to face resistance extending beyond Syria. The Iraqi government’s stand was the most militant of all the Arab government. In contrast, the Egyptian government, under Mahmoud Nokrashi Pasha, was yielding to British pressure and voiced limited support for Syria, despite the fact that the Egyptian people and the king were showing their support for it. A report to Mardam Bey from Asem al-Naili, the Syrian representative in Cairo, stated that the government was still imposing strict censorship on the reporting of news on the situation in Syria and that there was hardly any mention in the press of the latest developments. He wrote that even high-ranking members of the Egyptian government were asking him privately for any news he could give them, and that the king was daily sending him emissaries to find out what was happening. On one occasion the minister of education, al-Sanhouri Pasha, told him that Syria should immediately convene the Arab League Council to discuss the necessary measures to support Syria. On another occasion Makram Pasha Ebeid said to him: “Why are you surprised that the Syrian situation is not mentioned in our press? Do you believe that we are independent?”

By 23 May the major Syrian towns had prepared themselves for an expected assault by French troops. In Aleppo, barricades were erected in various parts of the town and armed Syrians were preparing to move into Homs and Hama. In Jabal Druze, many young men volunteered to take up arms and Druze members of the Troupes Spéciales defected and marched to Damascus, offering their service to the government. All the main towns in Syria were closed and large demonstrations were held in Beirut and Tripoli. Busloads of students from the American University in Beirut arrived in Damascus to join a large student demonstration in front of the Serail. Mardam Bey came out and addressed them and called for order, promising to remove all occupation forces from Syria and Lebanon. On 23 May the British commander of the Ninth Army met General Oliva-Roget in Damascus and stressed the importance of avoiding provocative action such as the stationing of tanks in the streets of the capital. Oliva-Roget refused to consider the withdrawal of his troops and said that they were there for ‘intimidation’. The same day Mardam Bey sent a note to General Beynet protesting against the deployment of French troops in the streets of Aleppo, where French officers forced their way into the Mohafez’s offices claiming they had orders to search the premises.

On 25 May Mardam Bey called the British and Soviet representatives to the foreign ministry and informed them that the situation in Aleppo was very tense, and that the Troupes Spéciales were deserting in scores and that the issue was no longer a diplomatic, but a military one. He told
them that he had received the full support of the Arab states, whose
governments had sent letters of protest to the British and French
governments. He had himself sent a telegram to the president of the San
Francisco conference protesting against French attempts on Syrian
independence. Mardam Bey told the British chargé d'affaires, Young,
that the only way the situation could be saved was by General Paget
ordering the withdrawal of French troops from the towns, delivering
arms to the gendarmerie and handing over a brigade of the Troupes
Spéciales. Young immediately sent a telegram to his government saying:
'I am practically certain there will be a showdown this weekend unless
somehow or other the French can be induced at the highest level to
accept [Mardam Bey's proposition].' He added: 'I feel we have shot our
bolt here.' At the same time General Paget sent a message to the War
Office saying: 'Armoured car and lorry patrols continue to move through
the streets of Aleppo and Damascus. Tanks remain in Damascus. Aircraft
fly low over mosques during hour of prayer. Machine-guns are
permanently sited on roofs of buildings . . . In my opinion French are
deliberately courting a clash with the States. Will you represent this to
Paris and try to get order issued from them to curb these activities.'

Duff Cooper in Paris was instructed to meet General de Gaulle to
urge him to defuse the situation, but de Gaulle was not receptive and
told Duff Cooper that he was not prepared to make concessions in the
face of disorder and threats. The American government instructed its
ambassador in Paris to present an aide-mémoire urging de Gaulle to
inform the Syrian and Lebanese governments that he was ready to
negotiate with them as independent states, that as proof of his goodwill,
he would be ready to give them assurances that the French delegation
would acquire a diplomatic status, that the Troupes Spéciales would be
transferred to them and that in consultation with the British government
he would arrange the withdrawal of Allied troops and, finally, that the
French government would not use its troops to influence the course of
negotiations.

General de Gaulle was impressed neither by the British request nor
by the American aide-mémoire. In his memoir, Le Salut, de Gaulle wrote
that, as he was convinced that the British were plotting with the Syrians
to oust the French, he had defined his intentions in advance: 'We shall
not leave, unless we are forced to, even if we have to go as far as fighting
both the rebellion and the English . . . I had no intention of agreeing to
surrender in either case.' General de Gaulle was therefore determined
to fight to remain in Syria, and this was absolutely clear to the Syrian
government at the time. Two communiqués issued by Oliva-Roget to the
French forces fell into the Syrian government's hands. The first
communiqué was addressed to the French officers and soldiers and also
to those under French command (Troupes Spéciales). It called upon
them to make the necessary preparations to preserve the "honour" of France and to maintain order, and threatened to court-martial any member of the forces who disobeyed orders. Oliva-Roget said that it was the military duty of France to annihilate all the elements who intrigued against it, that all government offices had to be occupied, that all communications with the neighbouring Arab states were to be blocked, that Syrians should be disarmed and the country governed by a military commander. He issued orders to the troops that, on receipt of written instructions, they were to occupy government quarters, and specified that the forces stationed in the French delegation would move towards the presidency and the homes of the ministers to arrest them. The communiqué also contained detailed instructions on the deployment of French troops for the take-over of the capital city and other major towns. The second communiqué was addressed to all French subjects instructing them not to expose themselves to danger and not to move about except in armed groups; it asked them to have patience for a few days, when the French assault would start.

On 26 May Mardam Bey met the Lebanese prime minister, Abdel Hamid Karameh, and the foreign minister, Henri Pharaon, in Shtaura to discuss the latest developments and asked Shone to join them. Shone, acting on instructions from the Foreign Office, advised yet again the governments to abstain from all provocation and informed them that his government was making representations to Paris. Both the Syrian and Lebanese ministers pointed out that they were under great pressure from parliament, and that it was physically impossible to restrain their people in the face of French provocation, especially since the British were still denying them the necessary arms for their gendarmeries. Pharaon told Shone that his government had support from all parts of Lebanon to resist French demands and that if Syria exploded, Lebanon "would go up too". Mardam Bey told Shone that if his government was keen to avert a clash, he should ask Beynet to take urgently the measures he (Mardam Bey) had suggested earlier to Young. Shone said that he would see Beynet that same day and communicate to him Mardam Bey's proposals. After meeting Beynet, Shone reported to Eden that Beynet told him that he had shown "angelic patience" in dealing with the Syrians and that the situation all over Syria was calm except in Damascus where there was a "battle atmosphere". Shone had asked Beynet to restrain his military, to which Beynet had replied that he could not discuss details concerning military precautions, especially since French lives and property were at risk. Shone concluded his message to Eden by saying: "Altogether a most depressing conversation from which no glimmer of light emerged."9

On 27 May trouble broke out in Homs and Hama. Mardam Bey called Young and Wadsworth late that evening to meet him and Saadallah al-
Jabri. Mardam Bey informed them that battles were raging in Hama where many French soldiers were wounded and where Senegalese troops were firing indiscriminately. At Homs barricades were erected, and when the French at the Delegation opened fire, there was an immediate uproar and large crowds gathered to besiege the Delegation. He added that his government could no longer be responsible for internal security, that mass desertions from Troupes Spéciales was unavoidable, that Damascus would definitely explode, and that he was prepared to lead the people in a war against the French. He warned Wadsworth and Young that unless their governments took immediate action to put out the fire, it would blaze throughout the Arab world. He told Young that he had sent a telegram to Churchill on 23 May asking him to persuade the French to withdraw their troops and respect Syrian sovereignty, but had not yet had a reply. On hearing Young's account of the meeting, Shone sent a telegram to his government proposing that British forces should 'step in now'. Although that would clearly risk a clash with the French, he said, it would stop far graver developments.

On 28 May Churchill held a meeting with Eden and the chief of the imperial general staff to discuss the instructions to be sent to General Paget. Churchill insisted that all Paget had to do was 'to maintain an impartial and negative attitude towards both the French and the Syrians and to protect British soldiers and dependants'. Eden warned Churchill that the 'course of events might be such that it would be necessary to return to him for a decision with regard to action' by British troops. But Churchill was determined that Britain 'should not get involved' and that the 'French and the Syrians should be left alone to fight the matter out', and said that he would only agree to action by British troops if it were taken jointly with American troops. He refused to attach importance to the reports from British Middle East posts to the effect that if Britain did nothing to stop the fighting, it would be held to have let the Arab world down and to have gone back on obligations undertaken when it endorsed the Proclamation of Independence of Syria and Lebanon.

After the meeting Churchill sent a reply to Mardam Bey's telegram in which he expressed his concern over the breakdown of negotiations between Syria and France, adding that he would 'give careful attention to this new development' and that he was already in consultation with the United States government and in constant contact with the French. Churchill concluded his message by stating: 'I cannot see that anything has happened which could possibly justify hostilities or bloodshed such as you refer to and indeed it is the duty of Syria, as one of the United Nations, to refrain from precipitating any situation which would almost certainly impede the war with Japan.'

Upon receipt of Churchill's telegram, Shone telephoned Mardam Bey from Beirut and read him its content and told him he would come the
following day to Damascus to deliver it in person. The following day the French started their assault. The Chamber was scheduled to assemble at 5 p.m., and the French plan was to shell the building, killing or capturing members of the government and the deputies, thereby creating a constitutional vacuum which they would step in to fill. Events for the day, as reported by Mardam Bey in his private papers, were as follows:

Mardam Bey went to the Serail in the morning where he addressed a demonstration of women's organisations. He then went to see the president who was still very ill. At 5 p.m. he went to the Chamber where Saadallah al-Jabri informed him that due to the absence of most of the deputies, the session had been postponed. Mardam Bey told al-Jabri that he had to go to the Serail where he was due to hold a press conference with American and British correspondents and he asked him to join him later for dinner with Shone to discuss Churchill’s message. As he left the Chamber, Mardam Bey noticed that there was an unusually large French force surrounding the building with tanks and armoured vehicles. As soon as he arrived at the Serail, he telephoned al-Jabri and told him to leave his office immediately with all the deputies that were still there. At 7 p.m. the French forces hoisted the French flag over their headquarters opposite the parliament building and told the Syrian police force guarding the Chamber to salute the flag. The Syrian commander refused; thereupon a hand grenade was thrown by one of the French soldiers, signalling the start of intensive shelling. Al-Jabri had left a few minutes earlier. The Senegalese troops killed most of the Syrian policemen and captured the rest. They forced their way into the building, destroyed and ransacked it and searched for deputies and members of the government, whom they had orders to arrest, not being aware that the session had not taken place. French troops entered the president’s office, confiscated all the papers and took away the safe. When they realised that no members of the government, or deputies, were in the building and that their plan was thus foiled, they trained their guns on government buildings and hit some, including the citadel (the state prison, where many inmates were killed).

Mardam Bey and all the other members of the cabinet were at the Serail when the shelling started. The French, who were determined to get rid of Saadallah al-Jabri and Mardam Bey, after having missed them in parliament, shelled the Orient Palace Hotel where al-Jabri stayed when in Damascus, and killed a number of foreigners, including two British officers. Then they directed their assault on the ministry of foreign affairs, hoping to catch Mardam Bey. They ransacked the ministry building, taking away with them the official seal, probably to use for forging communiqués and statements. The Serail was spared, because the French learnt that Mardam Bey was holding meetings with foreign
diplomatic representatives and giving a press conference to American and British correspondents. They could hardly risk killing foreign officials and pressmen, many of whom were American and British subjects. Shortly after the shelling started, French troops stormed the telecommunications headquarters and power stations, so that no news could come out of Syria and no electricity could be supplied to the capital.

Mardam Bey realised that if he remained in the Serail, the government would be trapped and so become an easy target for the French. His own house was far from the Serail and, being situated opposite the French embassy, was the most vulnerable place in Damascus. By 9 p.m. French aircraft had gone into action and bombs fell around the Serail. Mardam Bey instructed everyone to leave under cover of darkness, and told the ministers to disperse and take shelter in the nearest homes they could find; he and the minister of the interior headed for Khaled al-Azm's house, which was located in an area where there were no French troops and could be reached by the backstreets. Upon arrival at al-Azm's house, Mardam Bey telephoned President al-Quwatli to assure him that the government was safe and that he would see him in the morning. The conversation was monitored by the French, who immediately began to shell the Souk Sarouja area where al-Azm's house was located. Khaled al-Azm was not then a member of the government.

In the early hours of 30 May the Nationalist deputy Fakhri al-Baroudi, whose house had been shelled during the night, managed to reach al-Azm's house and informed Mardam Bey that the French had destroyed many installations; what was worse was that they were spreading the rumour that the government had fled the capital and that a rebellion against the government was under way in the Kurdish quarter of Damascus. Mardam Bey, who was about to go to the President, got quickly into his car and, with only his driver and one guard, drove straight to the Kurdish quarter to find out for himself what was happening. By making a personal appearance there he was taking a very real risk, but the result was almost magical. Upon seeing him act with courage, the Kurds rallied round the government and volunteered to fight the French. Mardam Bey invoked their patriotic feelings by addressing them as the sons of the great Salah al-Din who delivered crippling blows to the European occupiers of Arab lands, and he called upon them to follow in his footsteps.

Mardam Bey reached al-Quwatli's house shortly after and found a British tank parked outside with General Clark in command. Alarmed, he asked why the British tank was there and was told that it had escorted the American chargé d'affaires. For a moment Mardam Bey had thought either that the president's condition had deteriorated sharply or that he had asked for British protection. Al-Quwatli and Mardam Bey briefed the
American envoy on the latest developments and requested prompt American intervention to stop the shelling. The intensive shelling had ceased, but sporadic fire continued. The American was taken by surprise when he saw Mardam Bey, and told him that the French had informed him that the government had fled Damascus. He said that he himself was unable to move in the city without British military protection, which he understood from Shone could be offered to members of the government if they requested it. Mardam Bey, who was by then in a very militant mood, replied that the day he would need foreign protection to move in his own capital city would be the day when he would relinquish all his responsibilities towards Syria. Both al-Quwatli and Mardam Bey told the Americans that they were determined to resist French aggression, even if that meant taking up arms as they had done in 1925, only this time the outcome would be different as Syria had the support of all the Arab states and was a member of the United Nations. In fact, reports were coming in that demonstrations had taken place in Egypt, Iraq, Palestine and Transjordan. They also had the assurances of the Lebanese government that Lebanon stood solidly behind Syria. However, the president emphasised the importance of American pressure being applied on both Britain and France to fulfil their promises to the Arabs who, he added, had stood firmly behind them during the war. The Syrians pointed out to the American envoy that a swift solution of the Syrian crisis was the acid test which would verify that the Allies, who had fought hard to rid the world of Nazi tyranny, meant what they preached.

Mardam Bey remained with the president all day. In the afternoon, Shone, accompanied by Furlonge and escorted by a British tank, called on them. Before going to the president’s house, Shone had instructed Young in Beirut to see Beynet and to demand information on the shelling of Damascus and also to cable London requesting that ‘Commander-in-Chief be awarded full powers to deal with this deplorable situation’. Young had reported to Shone and to London that he had seen Beynet ‘who was in calm and cheerful mood’ and had told him that several French posts had been simultaneously attacked and that Oliva-Roget had given orders to retaliate. Beynet had maintained that the situation was not serious and that the ‘abscess of Damascus had to be lanced’, that the ‘atmosphere of battle suited him’ and that ‘now that the barrel had been broached, wine must be drunk’. Both Shone and the commander of the Ninth Army had tried to contact Oliva-Roget but were told he was not available.11

Shone’s meeting with the president and Mardam Bey proved to be difficult and embarrassing for Shone because of the message Churchill had sent Mardam Bey two days earlier. In fact, not only was Shone’s task in Syria difficult, but also that of British envoys in other Arab
capitals. Lord Killeam reported from Egypt that when the American ambassador in Cairo had asked him whether he was ‘preaching restraints to the Egyptian government in regard of the crisis in the Levant States’, he was too embarrassed to tell the American that he did not ‘relish broaching the question with the Egyptian Prime Minister’ as he would have had to answer the awkward question of what British policy was. Killeam added: ‘With respect I might find it difficult to answer convincingly.’ Both the British ambassadors in Iraq and Saudi Arabia expressed similar sentiments.12

The meeting between al-Quwatli, Mardam Bey, Shone and Furlonge that afternoon was stormy. Mardam Bey used particularly harsh words about British policy, referring to ‘Perfidious Albion’. He told Shone that rather than preach restraint to the Syrians, Churchill could do better by putting an end to the French onslaught. The president said that the British had troops who could prevent French aggression at a moment’s notice, yet they were doing nothing; if they failed to act while there was still time, he said, they would bear a heavy responsibility not only towards the Arabs, but towards the whole world. Shone did not have much to say, except that he had already informed his government of the grave situation and that he would relay their observations to the British prime minister and foreign secretary. As he was leaving, Shone told Fouad al-Halabi, the president’s secretary, that he never thought that as a representative of Britain he would be exposed to such harsh criticism.

That night, French shelling started again, this time with greater intensity and less discrimination. It lasted all night. Earlier, both the American and British ministers had offered to move the president to a safer place, considering his state of health, but he categorically refused and told them he would rather die in his bed than leave his countrymen who were being massacred.

At its meeting of 30 May the British cabinet decided to send a message to President Truman requesting American support for British intervention in Syria. Churchill wrote to the American president that the situation in Damascus had deteriorated and added: ‘The continuance of the present situation will cause most grave trouble throughout the Middle East and upon our joint line of communications via Egypt and the Canal with the Far East. We should therefore be prepared to order the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, to intervene to stop the fighting. Before doing so I feel I ought to know that we should have your support and approval.’

British military intervention was delayed for another 48 hours, pending the United States response. Meanwhile the shelling continued. The French were even firing at ambulances and firemen attempting to put out the blaze. In the other Syrian towns, the French were being
trounced. Hama put up fierce resistance and soon defeated the French forces: two French airplanes were downed and the commander of the French forces was killed; many French soldiers were injured and taken prisoner. In Houran, the French troops were routed, the survivors disarmed and taken prisoner. In Jabal Druze, they were crushed and the survivors were given sanctuary in the Mohafez's own property. Beynet requested his government to send in more reinforcements to prevent further humiliation. As for the Troupes Spéciales, by 29 May, 70 per cent of all officers and 40 per cent of all soldiers had defected and joined the gendarmerie; the rest were disarmed by the French and detained in their barracks. But in Damascus the Syrian government was completely cut off from the outside world on 30 and 31 May; even the foreign delegations were unable to communicate with their governments. Mardam Bey managed to send messengers on foot to the consuls of Transjordan and Egypt to urge them to leave immediately and inform their governments of the deplorable situation. The Egyptian consul, Fathi Radwan, managed to reach Beirut where he could contact his government, but Abdel Monem al-Rifai was shot by French soldiers outside the town of Dara on the way to Amman. He was left for dead by the French soldiers, but was saved by the Mohafez of Hauran, Haidar Mardam Bey. His injury was grave and his leg had to be amputated.

Saadallah al-Jabri, who was stranded in his hotel, unable to communicate with the government, received a message by hand from Mardam Bey asking him to try to find some means of getting to Beirut so that he could go from there to Cairo to attend the Arab League Council and seek urgent help. By pure coincidence the Russian Orthodox Patriarch, who had arrived on a visit to Syria on 29 May, was staying at the same hotel, and was then about to leave for Cairo via Beirut. The Soviet minister, Solod, arrived at the hotel to accompany the Patriarch to Beirut, after having asked Oliva-Roget to cease fire during the Patriarch's drive out of Damascus, to which Oliva-Roget had agreed. In the hotel, Solod encountered al-Jabri and offered to take him to Beirut. Al-Jabri accepted to go in Solod's car only as far as the outskirts of Damascus. From there he proceeded to Beirut in a private Syrian car; he did not wish to be seen arriving in Lebanon under foreign protection. On arrival in Beirut, al-Jabri called a press conference and made statements about the situation, which the Lebanese press immediately published. Thereupon demonstrations took place in the major Lebanese towns. The Lebanese president and government offered all the facilities at their disposal to al-Jabri, including the prime minister's private office.

On 31 May the Syrian cabinet met at the president's house and sent urgent telegrams to Churchill, Truman and Stalin via the respective
wireless sets of the British, American and Soviet missions. Earlier in the morning information had reached Mardam Bey that rumours were being spread throughout Syria that the members of the government, together with the president, had fled to the mountains, and that the French had approached a number of their Syrian collaborators, namely Bahij al-Khatib, Safuh al-Muayyad and Nasuh Babil, to form a provisional government. The cabinet had to act quickly to rebut these rumours as these might affect the morale of the population. Messengers were dispatched to all quarters in Damascus to deny the rumours and also to warn that anyone who collaborated with the French would stand trial for treason. During the cabinet meeting, Colonel Stirling, the British liaison officer in Damascus, informed the ministers that the British military command had requested a cease-fire for several hours to arrange for the evacuation of American and British civilians in the city. Mardam Bey took advantage of this opportunity and asked Stirling to arrange safe passage for food and medical supplies to the various quarters in Damascus during the cease-fire. The cabinet then took steps to ensure delivery of such help.

That same morning Shone had sent a message to Eden telling him that the French had 'instituted nothing short of a reign of terror... Every British soldier and civilian, and every American citizen is horrified by what the French are doing,' he wrote. Shone warned that unless the British intervened immediately, 'the first signs of animosity' shown to him by the president and Mardam Bey 'would increase hourly'. He added 'This will surely spread throughout the whole Middle East.' Sir Edward Grigg sent a similar message from Cairo: 'French have now put their hands to a German process of butchery and blind destruction in Syrian towns. Recent telegrams from all our Missions in this region have also shown that continuation of the process will rouse all the Arab States.'

In Cairo, the Egyptian prime minister, Nokrashi Pasha, sent a telegram to Eden protesting against French aggression and calling upon the British government to act to stop the bloodshed. Nokrashi had been under pressure from the Egyptian parliament where the party of the opposition, al-Wafd, was demanding that press censorship be lifted to allow reports on events in Syria to be published. King Farouk finally intervened personally to have censorship lifted on news coming from Syria. The Iraqi prime minister, Hamdi al-Pachachi, told the British that if they did not intervene to stop the bloodshed in Syria, his government would dispatch troops to Syria if requested by the Syrian government. King Abdel Aziz sent a message to the United States and Britain, saying: 'Syria and Lebanon have only come to this pass because they relied upon the Allies' and that therefore he requested the two 'friendly governments to intervene urgently and actively'.
The British cabinet met again on 31 May and decided that in view of the latest information coming from Syria and of the reports coming from the British representatives in all Arab capitals, as well as the French intention to bring in reinforcements, the British government would take military action before the situation got out of hand. Churchill inquired from the American ambassador about Truman’s reply, but was told it had not yet come through. Churchill then informed the ambassador that ‘in view of the continued deterioration His Majesty’s Government had no alternative but to act... without waiting any longer for the President’s reply’. He then ordered a telegram to be sent to General de Gaulle asking him to order the French troops to cease fire and withdraw to their barracks. Just before the telegram was actually sent, Truman’s reply arrived endorsing Churchill’s action. The British chief of staff was then instructed to prevent ships from landing reinforcements in Beirut. That same evening Furlonge went to see Mardam Bey and informed him officially that Churchill had sent a telegram to de Gaulle and had instructed General Paget to assume supreme command in the Levant, that Paget was to inform Beynet that he was now under his command, that firing was to cease and that French troops were to be withdrawn to barracks. Furlonge said that General Paget, who happened to be in Egypt, would arrive in Damascus the following day and hoped that the situation would be brought under control. Furlonge informed Mardam Bey that in order to avoid any further delay, Churchill had ordered that his message to General de Gaulle and his instructions to the commander-in-chief be announced by Eden in the House of Commons before de Gaulle had time to see them.

On receiving Churchill’s instructions, Paget sent a telegram to Beynet from Cairo informing him of the British government’s orders and of his imminent arrival in Beirut. Beynet did nothing to stop French shelling during the night of 31 May and the morning of 1 June, but informed Oliva-Roget that a cease-fire would be enforced soon. Oliva-Roget decided to cause as much damage as possible in the meantime, hoping that the Syrian government would capitulate and that he would become the de facto master of the situation when the British arrived. On the morning of 1 June, looting by the Senegalese troops started on a large scale all over Damascus and it was not until the afternoon when General Paget arrived with British troops, that the French forces withdrew to their barracks. Paget reported to London what he saw in Damascus: ‘City had been subjected to fire and much looting by Senegalese during morning. H.M. Minister has in no way exaggerated the damage done to the city... The scene is one of wanton destruction.’ Paget added that he had ordered Beynet to remove Oliva-Roget from his command and from Syria as he could not answer for his safety.
Withdrawal and independence

General Paget, accompanied by Shone, called at the Syrian President's house where members of the Syrian and Lebanese government were assembled, including the Lebanese prime minister. Paget officially informed both the Syrian and Lebanese governments that he had taken over command and would undertake to restore order throughout Syria, and that he requested the Syrian government's agreement to impose a curfew until order and peace returned. The Syrian government gave him formal authorisation to do so. Fighting in Damascus came to an end, but not in the rest of Syria where it continued for a few more weeks as evidenced by the reports of the various governors of the provinces. After the meeting with General Paget, al-Quwatli and Jamil Mardam Bey sent telegrams of thanks to Churchill and Eden for Britain's intervention to stop the shelling in Damascus. Eden sent a courteous reply to Mardam Bey saying: 'I was glad to receive your Excellency's message in the name of the Syrian government and should like to thank you for it. We must now work together to secure a fair solution of all these outstanding questions which will, I hope, give every full satisfaction to all parties concerned.' Eden's message hinted that, although the use of force was not admissible, the Syrians would still have to work out a solution with the French.

Churchill's reply to al-Quwatli was downright provocative. He wrote: 'Now that we have come to your aid I hope you will not make our task harder by fury and exaggeration. The French have got to have fair treatment as well as you, and we British, who do not covet anything that you possess, expect from you that moderation and helpfulness are due to our disinterested exertions.' The president was baffled by Churchill's reply. In form and content it seemed to him both insulting and out of context, considering it was a response to his expression of personal gratitude for British help. Both he and Mardam Bey saw that there was more to it than simply gruffness, and that British pressure would start all over again to bring about a conclusion of a treaty with France. Their misgivings were confirmed when Shone showed them the full text of Churchill's message to General de Gaulle, which read: 'Once firing had ceased, and order is restored, we shall be prepared to begin tripartite (British, American and French) discussions in London.' The Syrian president told Shone and General Paget in the presence of the Lebanese government, that after what the French had done in Syria, there was no way he or any Syrian would sign a treaty with France and that it would be impossible for any Syrian government, whatever its inclination, to cooperate on any level with the French.

One of the most revealing documents in the British files about the British attitude towards the Arabs is the telegram sent by Churchill to his
Syria’s Quest for Independence

Ambassador in Iraq to be relayed to the Iraqi government following the French military attack on Syria. He wrote:

We have delivered them and the Arab world from a great danger and all they say about it is: (Quote) our action is regarded as no more than our duty (Unquote). This is an impudent assumption in their minds and should be challenged. It is not our duty to keep order among all these turbulent factions . . . Do not be too satisfied with these Arab pretensions. Make them feel that the power which has quelled the French might as easily be used against them if they put themselves equally in the wrong by arrogance.15

It seemed that Churchill could not restrain his imperialistic tendency and that he was determined to save the French in Syria in order to justify the British colonial presence elsewhere in the world. Even a year later, when he was no longer prime minister, and Najib al-Armanazi invited him to a reception on the occasion of the evacuation of all foreign troops from Syria, he declined the invitation in these words: 'I do not think it is very appropriate to make the National Day of Syria correspond to the “withdrawal of foreign troops” . . . I certainly should not wish to participate in such a celebration as you have in mind. It seems to me to be based on prejudice, rather than on the gratification which should attend the reassertion of Syrian independence.'

These two statements by Churchill are found in a document and a publication which are readily available; the first can be found in the appropriate file at the Public Record Office in London, the second in a book by Najib al-Armanazi entitled: Syria: From Occupation to Evacuation (Suriya min al-ibtilal batta al-jalaa). Yet, for years, the myth that Syria was liberated by the British has endured. Some historians have attributed the attainment of Syrian independence to Churchill personally. What has rarely been mentioned is the fact that Syrian resistance to the French military attacks was intense in all the Syrian regions during the months of May and June and that the French forces were beaten in many areas. Prior to the British intervention, General Beynet had sent urgent messages to his government asking for military reinforcements. The truth is that the Syrian Nationalist government forced Churchill’s hand to put an end to the French assault at a time when Churchill could not openly reveal his imperialist prejudices to the world.

Despite al-Quwatli’s rejection of all negotiations with France, firmly expressed to Shone and Paget, the British government still wanted to see such negotiations opened. It tried to apply pressure on Fares al-Khoury, who was still in San Francisco, in the hope that, as Syrian prime minister, he might be able to persuade his cabinet to agree to negotiate with the French. Mardam Bey received a letter in early June from Fares
al-Khouri saying that a British government representative had visited him and had hinted that recent international developments had 'complicated' the Syrian problem, and that public opinion in Britain and America had been criticising the anti-French attitude of the British and American governments, and that it was still desirable to maintain friendly relations with France because of the situation in Europe. He went on to say that the British would leave Syria soon and that it would therefore be advisable for the Syrian government to approach the American government and ask it to act as mediator; he himself was ready to talk to the American administration once al-Khouri declared Syria's willingness to negotiate with the French on whatever basis it saw fit. The Syrian prime minister asked Mardam Bey's views on this latest British approach and stated that he was in no position to give an opinion, having been absent for so long. Mardam Bey replied by telegram on 14 June as follows: 'Our plan has not changed and cannot change. The only logical and just solution is unconditional recognition of our independence and sovereignty. If our stance was firm and determined before the recent events, it has become more so now. We do not recognise any privileges. The few units of Troupes Spéciales remaining under French command are deserting daily and joining our forces. The national morale is high.' He then asked the prime minister to return as soon as possible.

On 2 June General de Gaulle held a press conference in which he made contradictory statements regarding events in Syria and levelled serious accusations against Britain. At the conference he announced his rejection of Churchill's proposal for tripartite discussions on Syria and Lebanon in London and proposed instead a five-power conference to include the Soviet Union, China, the United States and Britain to discuss the problems of the whole Middle East. This meant that if France had to leave Syria and Lebanon, it would not leave the area alone. The most astonishing declaration made by General de Gaulle at that press conference was that the Syrian government had fled from the capital during the French attack, despite the fact that all the representatives of all the foreign powers in Syria had categorically denied this French allegation. But the general insisted that all the reports he received from the French authorities in Syria were true. He was not willing to hear anything else. It is the more astonishing that a leader like General de Gaulle, who acted as a great statesman when he entered Syria in 1941, and who later showed immense courage during the Algerian war, did not think of verifying the reports that were reaching him from the French military authorities in Syria. It is equally surprising that the General did not change his version of history 14 years later, when he recounted the events of May 1945 in the last volume of his memoirs, *Le Salut*, in 1959.
Saadallah al-Jabri held a press conference in Cairo on 3 June and dismissed all the general's allegations. On 5 June Churchill refuted de Gaulle's accusations against Britain in a statement to the House of Commons: 'The sense of General de Gaulle's speech was to suggest that the whole trouble in the Levant was due to British interference... So far from stirring up agitation our whole influence has been used in precisely the other direction.' As for de Gaulle's proposal for a five-power conference, he said that this needed careful consideration and would cause a great deal of delay. The Syrians immediately let it be known that no conference which dealt with Syria's interests or future in absence would be recognised. Consequently, neither the British proposal for a tripartite conference, nor the French proposal for a five-power conference saw the light of day.

Churchill was defeated in the general elections a month later, and it was not until late in the year that the newly elected Labour government pursued the matter in bilateral discussions between Ernest Bevin and Bidault, which ended in a Franco-British understanding over the Levant States in December 1945. This was promptly rejected by both Syria and Lebanon.

In June the Syrian and Lebanese ministers in London communicated a note verbale to the British government which stated that the two states were 'not willing to concede any influence to France or to conclude any treaty with her' and that they were determined to establish their relations with France only on 'such bases of international law as ordinarily govern the relations between States'.

At the same time, the Arab League Council met in Cairo to discuss the French aggression against Syria and passed resolutions supporting Syrian and Lebanese demands for the evacuation of all foreign troops from their territories. On 21 June the Syrian and Lebanese governments held a meeting in Damascus, after which they issued a joint communiqué stating that they had agreed to follow a joint policy, the aim of which was 'to put into application the resolution adopted by the Arab League Council: to dismiss all French employees in the service of the two governments, and to work for the withdrawal of all French troops from Syrian and Lebanese territory'. The two governments reaffirmed their determination not to grant a privileged or special position to any power and to pursue their policy of independence. The Lebanese foreign minister then announced to the press that the British government had undertaken to withdraw its troops at the request of the states.

In the following months and before the final evacuation of British and French troops in April 1946, various attempts were made by Britain and France to try to preserve some of France's interests in Syria and Lebanon, but to no avail. The Nationalists not only refused to come to
any agreement with France, but also insisted that the evacuation of
French and British forces from Syria and Lebanon should take place
simultaneously.

In December 1945, following the Bevin–Bidault agreement concern­
ing the respective 'interests' and 'responsibilities' of France and Britain
in the Middle East, the Syrian and Lebanese delegations to the United
Nations received instructions to refer the matter to the Security Council.
Invoking Article 14 of the Charter of the United Nations, the Syrian and
Lebanese governments drew the attention of the Security Council to the
unstable situation which the occupation of their countries by the British
and French armies was creating there. They said that there was no
justification for this continued occupation since hostilities in both
Europe and the Far East had ended. The two governments considered
that the Anglo-French Agreement reached on 13 December by Bidault
and Bevin was incompatible with the spirit of the United Nations
Charter and that it constituted a threat to the independence of Syria and
Lebanon.

The Security Council examined the Syrian and Lebanese complaint.
The United States representative introduced a resolution which received
seven votes. It read:

The Security Council takes note of the declarations made by the four
parties as well as by the other members of the Council; expresses its firm
hope that the foreign troops stationed in Syria and Lebanon will be
withdrawn as soon as it is possible to do so and that negotiations to this
end will be undertaken without delay by the parties concerned, asks
these parties to keep it informed of the results of these negotiations.

One of the first Soviet vetoes was used against the resolution. But the
French and British governments maintained that they were bound by
the resolution, since it had a majority of the votes. But the matter did
not go further.

In fact, the months of March and April 1946 saw the withdrawal of
foreign troops from both Syria and Lebanon. The 17th of April was
proclaimed the National Day of Syria.

In 1941 General de Gaulle wrote: 'Towards the complicated Orient, I
flew with simple ideas.' The simple ideas in 1941 were that Syria and
Lebanon were historically under French influence and should remain so
and that this objective would be achieved by proclaiming the
independence of the states and limiting this independence by means of
a treaty. He initiated a process of negotiations based on this
assumption, but when the Orient became too complicated, he used
force, while the British were still in Syria. It is surprising that General de
Gaulle, who had declared in 1943 that he was 'honoured by the
friendship of the statesmen of Damascus', was the same man who used
force against these same statesmen. He had committed a grave mistake by appointing General Beynet as Délégué Général of France; Beynet, who had neither the wisdom nor the vision of General Catroux, was largely responsible for the escalation of tension to the point of violence.

It is possible that General de Gaulle's obduracy in 1945 was due to his desire to be the liberator of Metropolitan France as well as the defender of its overseas possessions. His attitude then was a far cry from that which led him to affirm Algeria's right of self-determination. Jamil Mardam Bey reflected in 1960: 'If only de Gaulle had been as wise and as far-sighted in 1945 as he is now, much of what happened between us then would have been avoided, and the course of history might have changed.' General de Gaulle was maligned for years by the Arabs because of his assault on Syria in 1945, but his handling of the Algerian challenge made them forgive him. They will also remember that he was the only Western leader who stood up and pointed a finger at Israel, accusing it of aggression in 1967.

As for the Syrian Nationalist leaders, their success was largely due to their ability to exploit a number of factors to their advantage: French suspicions of the British, British anxiety about their interests in the Arab world and the emergence of the two new superpowers, the Soviet Union and the United States, on the international scene. Much of what has been written about Gamal Abdel Nasser being the Arab leader who brought about the demise of European imperialism in the Arab world at the time of the Suez crisis in 1956 is not true. The process was started by the Syrian Nationalists, solidly supported by the Lebanese Nationalists, during the Second World War. Syria and Lebanon were the first countries to emerge as sovereign and fully independent states in 1945 without binding themselves by agreements to the occupying power, despite fierce pressure from both Britain and France. Nearly a decade later, in 1953, President Gamal Abdel Nasser agreed to sign an agreement with Britain which laid down conditions for the evacuation of British troops from Egypt and granted Britain military bases in the Suez Canal zone.

Syria's example was an inspiration to others under foreign rule. The independence of Syria and Lebanon was achieved through the dedication of the Nationalists who enjoyed the support of their people during twenty-five years of ceaseless struggle. Their attachment to democracy, constitutionalism and liberty was as wholehearted as their quest for independence.
NOTES

1. PO 371/45588, 30 April 1945 and PO 371/45570, May 1945.
3. Ibid.
4. PO 371/45564, 18 May 1945.
5. Ibid.
6. PO 371/45567, 21 May 1945.
7. PO 371/45565, 23 May 1945.
8. Ibid., 25 May 1945.
9. Ibid., 26 May 1945.
10. Ibid., 28 May 1945.
11. Ibid., 29 May 1945.
12. Ibid.
13. PO 371/45568, 31 May 1945.
14. PO 371/45571, 2 June 1945.
15. PO 371/45570, 2 June 1945.
La Ligue Arabe

Jamil Mardam Bey

L'Union Arabe n'est, en effet, ni un rêve, ni une mystique, ni une théorie quelconque. C'est avant tout, une donnée positive, un état de fait qui s'impose au monde depuis des siècles. Si les liens politiques, depuis la chute de l'Empire Abbaside, avaient été brisés entre les différentes parties de l'Union Arabe, il y a lieu de remarquer que l'Unité morale entre ces régions n'avait jamais été altérée. Sur un même territoire a toujours vécu un même peuple qui parle la même langue, s'émeut aux mêmes souvenirs, aspire à un même idéal et adopte la même attitude vis-à-vis du destin. Les mêmes auteurs arabes classiques sont toujours étudiés à Baghdad, Damas, au Caire, à la Mecque, à Sanaa, à Beyrouth, à Tunis et à Fez. Les mêmes journaux et les mêmes livres sont lus partout. Aucune des grandes fédérations orientales ou européennes de notre époque n'offre, entre les différents éléments qui la constituent, une cohésion spirituelle aussi forte que celle qui existe entre les États Arabes. Au cours de ces huit derniers siècles les Arabes ne perdirent jamais conscience de leur unité. Toutes les fois qu'un prince, un monarque ou un général se sentait assez puissant, il s'efforçait de reconstituer à son profit l'Union Arabe. Parmi les dernières tentatives, il convient de mentionner notamment celle des Wahabites à la fin du 18ème siècle et de Mohammad Ali d'Égypte, durant le premier tiers du 19ème siècle. Vers la fin du 19ème siècle et le début du 20ème siècle, un mouvement intellectuel très vif avait largement contribué à la défense et à l'illustration du programme unitaire. Entre les deux Guerres, à toutes les occasions importantes, se manifestaient la solidarité arabe. En 1934, à la suite de difficultés survenues entre l'Arabie Séoudite et le Yémen, une Délégation de personnalités formée de Représentants de tous les Pays Arabes se rendit en Arabie Séoudite et au Yémen et parvint à régler les affaires intéressant les deux Royaumes. Un traité fut conclu entre l'Arabie Séoudite et le Yémen, à Taif, cette année-là, où sont déjà mentionnés certains principes essentiels de la collaboration entre les Pays Arabes telle qu'alors elle se
présentait. Ces principes inspirèrent également le Traité, conclu le 2 Août 1936 entre l'Arabie Séoudite et l'Irak.

Les événements survenus à Damas notamment en 1925–26 et les événements de Palestine permirent aux Arabes d'affirmer leur entente sur ce qui se rapportait à leurs droits. Le Bloc Arabe était affecté par tout ce qui touchait à l'une de ses parties. Une attitude politique commune avait été concertée, entre tous les Pays Arabes, à Bloudan, en Syrie, en 1937 et au Caire en 1938, au sujet de la défense de la Palestine.

Voilà pourquoi, le Gouvernement syrien réserve l'accueil le meilleur à l'invitation qui lui fut adressée par Nahas Pacha en 1943.

Au Caire les différents Pays Arabes du Proche-Orient étudièrent successivement les multiples formes que pouvaient prendre leurs aspirations communes. Ils avaient surtout en perspective l'organisation de l'avenir immédiat. Aussi, le problème de la libération nationale fut-il le premier à solliciter l'attention.

En Septembre 1944, un Comité préparatoire fut convié à Alexandrie. Il termina le 7 Octobre la rédaction d'un Protocole où étaient exposés les grandes lignes et les principes d'une Ligue Arabe. Sur la Base de ce Protocole, fut signé au Caire le 22 Mars, 1945 un Pacte définissant les différentes modalités de la coopération entre les Pays Arabes sur les plans politique, économique, culturel et social.

Ce Pacte comprend un Préambule, 20 Articles et trois Annexes. Le Préambule constitue en quelque sorte un exposé des motifs dont l'un des plus intéressants à relever est sans doute une référence à "l'opinion publique dans tous les Pays Arabes", dont l'action, en ce qui concerne le regroupement arabe, a devancé et dirige encore celle des gouvernements. Les vingt Articles du Pacte sont consacrés principalement à la définition, aux buts et à l'organisation de la Ligue. Sont membres de la Ligue tous les États Arabes indépendants. L'Article 2 du Pacte précise son objet:

La Ligue a pour objet le resserrement des rapports entre les États membres et la coordination de leur action politique en vue de réaliser une collaboration étroite entre eux, de sauvegarder leur indépendance et leur souveraineté et de s'intéresser, d'une manière générale, aux questions touchant les Pays Arabes et leurs intérêts.

Elle a également pour objet d'assurer dans le cadre du régime et des conditions de chaque État, une coopération étroite entre les États membres dans les questions suivantes:

(a) Les questions économiques et financières, y compris les échanges commerciales, les questions douanières, monétaires, agricoles et industrielles.
Syria's Quest for Independence

(b) Les communications, y compris les questions relatives aux chemins de fer, aux routes, à l'aviation, à la navigation et aux Postes et Télégraphes.

c) Les questions culturelles.

d) Les questions de nationalité, passeports, visas, exécution des jugements et extraditions.

e) Les questions sociales.

(f) Les questions sanitaires.

La Ligue est formée d'un Conseil, d'un Secrétariat Général, et d'un certain nombre de Commissions techniques. Les Délégués de tous les États membres – chacun ne disposant que d'une seule voix – constituent le Conseil qui se réunit en session ordinaire deux fois par an, en Mars et en Octobre, et en session extraordinaire toutes les fois que deux membres le demanderont. Son siège permanent est au Caire. Mais il peut choisir un autre lieu de réunion. L'une des missions les plus importantes du Conseil est d'arrêter les moyens par lesquels la Ligue collaborera avec les organisations internationales qui seront créées dans l'avenir pour assurer la paix et la sécurité et régler les questions économiques et sociales.

Concernant le Pacte de la Ligue Arabe, les Gouvernements avaient à tenir compte de deux courants d'opinion.

Selon les uns, il fallait à tout prix et aussi vite que possible, réaliser l'union absolue de tous les États Arabes indépendants. Aussi, ils considéraient que le Pacte ne répondait pas tout à fait aux aspirations nationales puisqu'il servait de base à une simple alliance, et puisque certaines de ses clauses privaient le Conseil de ses moyens d'action.

Selon un autre courant d'opinion, on devait arriver à l'unité arabe par étapes et par conséquent il y a lieu, dans les conditions actuelles, de s'en tenir strictement aux clauses du document signé le 22 Mars 1945.

A notre avis, le Pacte constitue un pas heureux vers la réalisation des aspirations unitaires de la Nation Arabe. Mais je pense que ce serait une erreur grave de vouloir analyser la nature juridique du Pacte, en s'inspirant des données fournies par les manuels de droit international. On comprendrait très mal la signification et la portée de la Ligue Arabe si l'on se reportait exclusivement au Pacte signé au Caire. Ce document reflète beaucoup plus les difficultés éphémères de l'époque où il fut rédigé que les intentions profondes de ses auteurs et de la Nation dont ils sont les Représentants. L'on sait que la liquidation du passé est une œuvre de longue haleine. L'essentiel était alors de fixer un point de départ et ce fut surtout ce qui avait été réalisé au Caire le 22 Mars 1945.

Ce jour-là même, fut franchie une étape. Mais le but n'était pas atteint. Voilà pourquoi il ne faudrait pas, en absorbant le Pacte de la Ligue Arabe, étudier littéralement ce qui y est écrit; on devrait plutôt envisager ce qui y est entendu. Le Pacte n'est pas un acte juridique, c'est plutôt un acte de foi. Il n'est pas un texte organique, mais une
La Ligue Arabe

proclamation où sont affirmés les principes d'une action nationale commune. Il ne consacre pas une situation acquise. Il représente plutôt un moment dans les démarches d'une grande Nation, dont l'histoire des dix derniers siècles a été particulièrement dramatique, vers une cohésion de plus en plus grande, vers une collaboration de plus en plus intime, vers une solidarité de plus en plus étroite. Les affinités existantes entre les différentes fractions du peuple Arabe sont trop subtiles pour être fixées par un traité; leur entente se passe de démonstration. Ce Pacte ne vaut du reste qu'entre les gouvernements. Mais le peuple a déjà été plus loin. Il sait, ce peuple Arabe, qu'il aura de nouveau un côté à jouer dans l'histoire, et qu'il doit encore consacrer des efforts au service de la cause des hommes. Si donc on essayait d'analyser ce Pacte, compte tenu des aspirations des masses arabes et de l'intention qui a présidé à son établissement et à la lumière des premières réalisations de la Ligue, on pourrait en dégager certains traits distinctifs qui en constituent l'originalité.

La Ligue ne comporte pas un cadre rigide. C'est un organisme en marche. Tel est son premier trait distinctif. Elle se présente comme une chose essentiellement vivante. C'est l'expression d'une volonté en action. Du passé, elle n'a à tirer que l'enthousiasme des souvenirs et des leçons d'expérience, c'est-à-dire des éléments de force. Mais c'est surtout le futur qui y est envisagé. Les Dirigeants Arabes veulent doter les Nations Unies d'une forme originale de collaboration entre États. Dès la première session du Conseil, ouverte au mois d'Octobre 1945, les grandes lignes d'une politique étrangère commune furent adoptées.

Le second trait distinctif de la Ligue réside dans la ferme intention de cet Organisme de représenter et de défendre les droits et les intérêts des Arabes du monde entier. C'est à ce titre que la Ligue considère que la cause de la Palestine est celle de tous les Arabes et que les revendications nationales de l'Égypte, en ce qui concerne la libération totale de son territoire et l'unité de la Vallée du Nil, sont appuyées par tous les États Arabes. De même, la Ligue considère de son devoir de soutenir les aspirations de la Libye à l'indépendance et les voeux légitimes des Pays de l'Afrique du Nord.

Enfin, la Ligue est déterminée à sauvegarder et à développer le patrimoine spirituel des Arabes. Plus d'un milliard d'hommes s'adressent à leur Créateur en langue Arabe. Les États Arabes, à mesure qu'ils seront libérés de la tutelle étrangère, travailleront à l'avènement d'un monde meilleur, à la restauration des valeurs morales et à l'établissement entre tous les hommes de bonne volonté, d'une ère de justice et de collaboration confiante et féconde.

L'Affaire de la Palestine dont le partage a été voté par l'Assemblée Générale des Nations Unies le 29 Novembre 1947, a permis aux différents États Arabes de manifester une cohésion et une solidarité. La
Syria's Quest for Independence

La Ligue avait à défendre la cause la plus juste qu'une Assemblée internationale ait eu à juger: la cause des Arabes de Palestine.

L'histoire ancienne que les Sionistes invoquent pour soutenir leurs prétentions, ne témoignent pas en leur faveur. Les tribus qui, à l'aurore de l'Histoire, vinrent de la Presqu'île Arabique en terre syrienne furent les premiers à peupler la Palestine. Pour les Israélites, la Palestine n'est pas un pays d'origine. Ils y ont été - et sur une partie seulement du territoire - pendant quelques siècles. Mais le fait d'y avoir été ne leur donne pas le droit d'en déloger ceux qui y sont à titre de propriétaires légitimes pour s'installer à leur place. Pour avoir été victimes en Europe et en Amérique, du racisme et de l'intolérance religieuse, les Juifs cherchent à créer en Palestine un État basé sur des considérations raciales - du reste contestables - et sur un mysticisme religieux intranigeant, oubliant que la Palestine est une terre sainte pour plus de deux milliards de non-Juifs, c'est-à-dire pour les Musulmans et les Chrétiens. Aucun peuple n'a été, au cours de l'histoire, aussi bienveillant et aussi humain envers les Israélites que le Peuple Arabe. Aujourd'hui les Israélites, appuyés par quelques jeunes puissances occidentales, ont pris position contre l'Orient tout entier, alors qu'ils auraient pu, s'ils avaient porté leurs efforts vers un territoire neuf d'Afrique ou d'Amérique, bénéficier de l'appui de tous les Pays du monde. De tout cela, il résulte que le Sionisme n'est pas seulement une entreprise contre la justice. C'est une entreprise contre la nature. Dans cet océan arabe et musulman qui s'étend sur l'Asie et l'Afrique, il ne serait pas possible d'installer, par la violence et par des interventions extérieures, un îlot sioniste qui ne pourrait jamais vivre par ses propres moyens et dont la population serait condamnée soit de périr sur place, soit à se jeter sur les pays voisins. Sans doute, les Arabes seront mis dans l'obligation de résister, car l'installation d'éléments étrangers au cœur même de l'Arabisme, ne cessera de constituer une menace grave pour les États Arabes. La Palestine est située entre la Syrie et l'Égypte. L'affaire palestinienne est donc au premier plan une affaire arabe. Le vote du partage de la Palestine a inauguré une ère de troubles dans la partie du monde qui était demeurée la plus pacifique et où la sécurité régnait plus que nulle part ailleurs. Ce vote a encore contribué à diviser le monde en deux camps, l'Orient et l'Occident alors que les nécessités de la Civilisation moderne imposent l'union de notre Planète et la collaboration de toutes les nations au bien-être. L'Histoire nous apprend qu'il est impossible d'arracher un peuple à sa terre, surtout si ce peuple est le peuple Arabe. Elle nous apprend surtout qu'il serait vain de tenter d'élever des échafaudages politiques au mépris des lois de l'équilibre et des lois de l'économie et de la géographie.
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Index

Abdel-Ilah, Prince (Iraqi regent) 114
Abdullah ibn Hussein, Emir of Transjordan 43, 46, 71, 169-70, 183, 184
Abed, Ali al- 3
Abi-Shahla, Habib 20, 101
Abu Alam, Sabri 76
administrative powers 87; Franco-Syrian agreement on transfer of 111-14, 115-18
Afta, Abdallah 209
Ajilani, Munir al- 67
Alawites 11, 32, 54, 193
Al-Ayyam 22
Aleppo 9, 33, 37, 38, 71, 193, 210; French in 195, 210, 211; French soldiers killed in 208; unrest in 70
Alexandria Protocol 146, 151, 153, 156, 157; Lebanon and 160
Al-Insba 108
al-Istiqial (Syrian party) 26
al-Jamia al-Arabiya al-Patat 1
Antaki, Naim 20, 126, 193
Arab Congress 1
Arab League Council 4, 224
Arab unity 76, 77, 91-2, 114-15, 146, 183; Mardam on xi
Areslan, Mazhar 80
Armanazi, Najib al- 189, 199, 222
Arsalan, Majid 101
Asali, Sabri al- 20, 27, 82, 191, 207
Asmahan 82
Atasi, Adnan al- 31, 109, 187-8, 189, 191, 194
Atasi, Hashem al-, President of Syria 3, 12, 50, 68, 70, 79; Catroux and 46, 72, 73, 74; resigns from presidency 17; and Vichy French 25, 30, 31
Atlantic Charter 79, 108
Atrash, Pasha al- 11, 177, 193
Axis Powers 34, 35, 37, 38, 61; Syria declares war on 182-3
Ayoubi, Ata al- 30, 31, 73-5
Azm, Haqi al- 3
Azm, Khaled al- 31, 32, 33-4, 38, 80, 215
Azma, Adel al- 17, 18
Azma, Yousef al- 10
Babil, Nasuh 22, 219
Balfour Declaration 7-8, 52
Banque de Syrie 10
Barazi, Husni al- 54, 58, 68-9
Baroudi, Fakhri al- 49, 98, 215
Beaumont, Richard 109
Bevin, Ernest 139, 224
Beynet, General 117, 118-20, 208, 222, 226; and Anglo-French agreement 132; as commander-in-chief 117-18; and crisis over July 14 celebrations 128, 130, 131; and educational reform 167-8; at Franco-Syrian talks 150-63; and French armed conflict 212, 216, 218, 220; meetings with Mardam 188, 203-4; returns to Levant 200, 201; and Soviet delegation to Syria 127-8; on Syrian government 123-4; on Syrian independence 169-70; on Troupes Spéciales 169, 178, 182, 186
Bidauld, Georges 180, 186-7, 194, 224
Blum, Leon 12, 13, 89
Bonnet, Georges xx, 13, 88
Bounours, M. 110
Brenan, Colonel 101, 102
Bukhari, Nasuh al- 17, 80
Caccia, Harold 42, 51
Cuizon, Lord George 9

Damascus 9; Congress in, 1943 70; demonstrations in 70; French troops in 211; shelling of 214–15, 217, 220

Deeb, Jamal Ali 173

De Gaulle, Charles 37, 38, 39, 62, 110, 223–4; and Anglo-French relations in Syria 64, 65, 66; and British in Syria 41, 46, 198; Churchill and 40, 65, 105, 117; and constitutional reform 70; and French troops in Syria 211; and Lebanon 99, 105; on Syria 225–6; and Syrian nationalists 44–7, 49, 88

Délegation Générale 90; and July 14 celebrations 128–9

Dentz, Henri 24–6, 37; and national strike 30–3

deportation 71
diplomatic representation 169, 185, 187

Directorate 17, 23, 24–5, 30

Eden, Sir Anthony 40, 50, 57, 106, 138; and British policy during armed conflict 213, 221; on British policy in Syria 82, 166, 171, 174, 175; on French in Syria 171; meeting with al-Quwatli 179–81; and Mardam 55, 56, 102–3; and Nationalists 49, 73; proclamation of 39–40, 45, 72; and Syrian independence 47–8, 50, 54, 61–2, 137, 151; and transfer of administrative powers 111–14, 116

Chamoun, Camille 94, 124

Chataigneau (general secretary of French delegation in Lebanon) 87, 95, 110, 125

Chiappe, Jean 23

China, recognition of Syrian independence by 125–6

Churchill, Sir Winston 71, 82, 113–14, 138; and British policy in Syria 40, 186, 189, 198, 202; and de Gaulle 40, 65, 105, 117, 224; on French in Syria 47, 140, 141, 142, 143; imperialism of 222; meeting with al-Quwatli 179–81; and use of British troops in Syria 150, 213, 217, 220, 221
civil disturbances 11, 99, 176–7; because of bread shortage 33, 60, 74; over French troops in Syria 200, 203, 206; and Lebanese crisis 96; and national strike 30; against participation of Muslim women in charity ball 122; by students 172, 173, 210

civil service 168

Clayton, General 132, 167

Collet, General 38, 48, 67, 69, 71, 82, 84; and Nationalist 49–50, 74

Common Interests 86–7, 90, 111

Congress, 1943 70
civil service 168

Constitution (1928) 2, 108, 109

Constitutional Bloc (Lebanon) 57

Convention Universitaire 110, 152, 168, 185, 186, 188, 195, 201, 204

Cooper, Sir Alfred Duff 171, 176, 186–7, 198, 211

cultural convention see Convention Universitaire

Curzon, Lord George 9

Damascus 9; Congress in, 1943 70; demonstrations in 70; French troops in 211; shelling of 214–15, 217, 220

Deeb, Jamal Ali 173

De Gaulle, Charles 37, 38, 39, 62, 110, 223–4; and Anglo-French relations in Syria 64, 65, 66; and British in Syria 41, 46, 198; Churchill and 40, 65, 105, 117; and constitutional reform 70; and French troops in Syria 211; and Lebanon 99, 105; on Syria 225–6; and Syrian nationalists 44–7, 49, 88

Délegation Générale 90; and July 14 celebrations 128–9

Dentz, Henri 24–6, 37; and national strike 30–3
deportation 71
diplomatic representation 169, 185, 187

Directorate 17, 23, 24–5, 30

Ebed, Makram 210

Eddé, Émile 56, 96

Ede, Sir Anthony 40, 50, 57, 106, 138; and British policy during armed conflict 213, 221; on British policy in Syria 82, 166, 171, 174, 175; on French in Syria 171; meeting with al-Quwatli 179–81; and Syria 139–40, 142–4; talks with the French 133, 134, 135

education system: Arabisation of 123; French demands on 168, 180

Egypt 4, 88–9; and Arab unity 28; demonstrations in 216; support for Syria 176, 179, 210; and Syrian independence 51, 55, 56, 57–8, 76, 167; visit by Syrian leaders to 91–2
elections 52, 58, 62, 63, 64, 66, 74; 1936 3; 1943 74, 77–8; 1947 4

Faisal I, King of Syria 2, 8, 9, 10, 69, 191

Farouk, King of Egypt 91, 179, 181–2, 189, 219

food shortages 24, 33, 60

France/French 8, 9, 10, 66; agreement with Syria on transfer of administrative powers 111–14;
demands of 186-8, 203-5; encourages separatist movements 207; fear of British ambitions in Syria 40, 47, 129-30, 131; Mardam on i, xii, xiii, xiv-xxviii; proposes treaty with Syria 142, 150-64; reaction to Nationalist proposals 57-8; reaction to student demonstrations 172, 176-7; relations with British in Syria 60-6, 132-6; talks with Syria, 1945 186-8; troops of in Syria 197, 198-203, 211-20; withdraws from League of Nations 33; in World War II 22, 37; see also Free French; French National Committee of Liberation; Vichy France
Franco-British understanding 224, 225
Franco-Syrian agreement, 1944 113, 115-18
Franco-Syrian discord 167-70
Franco-Syrian talks 109, 137, 146-65, 186-8
Franco-Syrian Treaty, 1936 12-13, 70, 72, 108; France prepared to ratify 92; Mardam on 88; non-ratification of 15, 17
Free French 37-41, 44-8; and Nationalist government 81, 82-5
French National Committee of Liberation 67, 81, 84, 136; and Lebanon 93-5, 99, 106-7; and the Mandate 108; Mardam on 85, 88; negotiation with Nationalists 86-90
Furlonge, Geoffrey 177, 216, 217, 220
Gardener (British consul in Syria) 20, 27, 41-2, 49
Gaylani, Rashid Ali al- 27, 28, 29, 34
Germany, and Syria 22, 27
Ghandour, al- 2
Gourand, General 9, 10, 11
Great Britain 9, 24, 27, 32; and Arab independence 7, 8, 114, 115, 221-2; attitude to Nationalists 20, 41-3, 48, 57, 58, 60-1; attitude to Syria 82, 84, 92-3, 104, 105-6, 137-44; demonstrations against in Syria 71; and Franco-Syrian relations 139-44, 184-5, 186, 222-3; French fears of in Syria 129-30, 131, 132; and French in Syria 39; intervention to stop fighting 221, 222; and Iraq 34, 35; and Lebanese crisis 95, 96, 100, 101-2, 104-5; Mardam and 191; prepares to leave Syria 191-2; relations with French in Syria 60-6, 133-6, 209; role of in armed conflict 213, 217, 219-20; and Syria's admission to San Francisco Conference 188-9, 190; and Syria in World War II 37, 38-41, 46-7 and Syrian independence 50, 51-2, 73; Syrian policy of 118-19, 134-5, 164-5, 170-1, 174-6, 180-1, 202-3, 217; Syrian talks with over arms 122-3, 124; troops of in Syria 140, 154-5, 174, 180, 191; and Turks in Syria 37, 38, 71
Grigg, Sir Edward 166, 167, 170, 174, 219
Haffar, Lutfi al- 17, 19, 22, 29, 31, 80, 94
Hakim, Hasan al- 50, 54
Hakim, Hikmat al- 193
Halabi, Fuad al- 217
Hama 9, 33, 210, 212, 213, 218
Hamilton (British chargé d'affaires in Lebanon) 55, 61
Hamza, Fuad 15, 169, 170
Hanani, Ibrahim 2, 68
Hasani, Taj al-Din al- 49-50, 51, 69; and elections 66, 67; presidency of 54
Hatem, Anouar 130-1
Helleu, Jean 66, 67, 69, 71, 74, 77; and Common Interests 86, 88, 89, 90; and Lebanon 94, 95-6, 105, 106; reply to Syrian memorandum 92
Henderson, Loy 114
Herriot, Édouard 201
Holmes, General 104, 120, 174, 176-7
Holt, Captain 42-3
Homs 9, 197, 210, 212, 213
Hourani, Akram al- 173
Hull, Cordell 138, 147
Humblot, General 176-7
Hunaidi, Qasim al- 173
Hurley, General 75
Husri, Sate al- 123
Index

Ibn Saud, Abdel Aziz, King of Saudi Arabia 4, 28, 29, 34, 35, 42, 71, 219; Mardam visits 115; Quwatli visits 179; and Syrian independence 51, 55

independence 88; apparently disregarded by French officials 128–9; attitudes to 50–3; de Gaulle and 45, 88; guaranteed by Allies 39–41, 90; law for protection of 200

Inönü, Ismet 71

Iraq 9, 11, 27, 28, 29, 88; demonstrations in 216; Mardam visits 114–15; nationalist takeover in 34; sends arms to Syria 209–10; support for Syria 176; and Syrian independence 51, 55, 80

Italy, and Syria 22, 27

Jabal Druze 11, 32, 54, 55, 82, 176, 193, 197, 210, 218

Jabri, Saadallah al- 12, 19, 22, 50, 79, 80, 96, 120, 202, 207; address to Syrian parliament 146–7; and British 135, 140, 192; and French troops in Syria 209, 214, 218; in Iraq 19, 20, 27, 34; and Lebanon 85, 86; on Mandate 109, 110; and national army 172, 173; and political detainees 82; press conference, June 1945 224; and public order 122; relationship with French 12, 87–8, 89, 111, 136; and Syrian independence 68, 76, 107; visit to Egypt, 1943 91–2

Jamiyyat al-Gharra 122, 129, 130

July 14 celebrations 128–30

Kanadly, General 70

Karameh, Abdel Hamid 195, 212

Kayali, Abd al-Rahman al- 80

Keller, general 16–17

Khani, Abdel Aziz al- 75

Khatib, Bahij al- 17, 21, 23, 219

Khatib, Zaki al- 21

Khouri, Beshara al- 58, 113, 159, 160; and French 151, 156; meeting with Egyptians 56; and Syria 85, 86

Khouri, Faiz al- 50, 67

Khouri, Fares al- 3, 12, 31, 33, 50, 67, 79, 147, 171, 222–3; on confrontation with French 172, 173; at Franco-Syrian talks, 1944 150, 152, 153, 156, 160, 161; second government of 190–5

Killearn, Lord 176, 179, 203, 217

King-Crane Commission 8

Lahoud, Emile 2

Lamartine, Alphonse de xx

Lampson, Sir Miles 39 see Killearn, Lord

Lascelles (British representative in Damascus) 95, 96, 101

League of Nations 48; France withdraws from 33, 108; and Mandate 9, 11

Lebanon 95, 151, 190, 212; Constitutional Bloc in 56, 57; crisis in 94–7, 98–9, 100–7; elections in 58, 73, 77, 85; France and 65, 87–8, 158, 159, 205, 224; independence of 39, 190, 226; July 14 celebrations in 128; and the Mandate 9, 10, 11, 87, 112; Puaux and 15, 16; recognition of 126, 148; Syria and 83, 85–6, 91, 95, 96, 98–101, 182, 191, 216; Syrian Nationalists and 56, 85–6; and transfer of administrative powers 112, 113

Lépissier (of Délégation Générale) 55, 194

Leygnes, Georges xi

Lyttelton, Oliver 40, 41

Lyttelton–de Gaulle agreement 41, 133, 164, 176, 181

MacKereth, Gilbert 132, 135

Madfai, Jamil al- 76

Maher, Ahmad 167

Mandate 6–7, 8, 9, 10–14, 44, 92, 106, 142–3; Lebanon and 87, 112; Mardam on ix–xi, xiii, 88, 98–9, 109; Syrian government’s attitude to 107–11, 112; and Syrian independence 87, 112

Mardam, Haidar 218

Mardam Bey, Jamil 1–5, 70, 93; on Arab League Pact 190; and Arab nationalism 27–9; and armed conflict 209–20 (passim); on army 124–5, 168–9, 172–3; and assassination of al-Shahbandar 19, 21–2; and British 43, 140–1, 147, 167, 191, 192, 221, 223; and Catroux 55, 56, 58–60, 102–3;
Index

and de Gaulle 44-5, 226; and educational reform 168; and Egyptian talks 56, 58, 59-60, 76-7; as foreign minister 79, 80, 81; and Franco-Syrian relations 85-6, 178-9, 194, 915, 203, 204, 209; at Franco-Syrian talks, 1944 150-63 (passim); and Free French 47-8; and French attitude to Syrian independence 128-9, 132-3; and French troops sent to Syria 199-203; French try to kill 214-15; and Ibn Saud 28, 29; and international recognition for Syria 125-7; and Iraqi revolt 34-5; and al-Khoury’s second government 190-2; ‘La Ligue Arabë’ 228-32; and Lebanese crisis 95, 96, 98-9, 100-2, 106, 107; ‘Legacy of Equivocation’ (‘Bilan d’une équivoque’) ix-xxii; on the Mandate ix-xi, xiii, 88, 98-9, 109; meeting with Beynet 188; meeting with King Farouk 181-2; negotiations with France 12-13, 87-90, 111, 113; resignation of 16; and Spears 82-3, 104; and support from Arab countries 55; on Syrian independence 81; and Transjordan 184; treaty with France 137-8; visits Egypt 91-2; visits Iraq and Saudi Arabia 114-15

martial law, threat of 102, 104

Massey, Colonel 194

Massigli 82, 84, 86, 124, 191; talks with British 133

Maysaloun, battle of 10

memorandum, 1943 87, 89-90; French reply to 90, 92-3

military bases, French want in Syria 187, 192, 204

Millerand, Alexandre 9

Molotov 127, 138

monetary system 83

Moyne, Lord 139, 140, 142, 143, 144, 149; assassination of 166

Muayyad, Nazih al- 21, 22

Muayyad, Safuh al- 21, 194, 219

Murshid, Sulayman al- 195, 197

Nabih al-Azma 17

Nahas Pasha 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 76; and Mardam 76-7, 91; and Palestine 77

Naili, Asem al- 21, 22, 189, 210

Nakkash, Alfred 171

Nami, Ahmed al-Damad 31, 32

Nasser, Gamal Abdel 4, 226

debate in Syrian parliament on 168-9; France refuses to hand over 129, 194; negotiations over 119, 125, 152-60; popular demand for 116, 120, 171-3, 197; see also Troupes Spéciales

National Bloc 2, 3, 12, 70; and assassination of al-Shahbandar 19-20, 21-2; and 1943 elections 74-5; Puaux and 17, 18, 19

national strikes: 1936 3; 1941 30-3

Nationalists 68-9, 224-5, 226; British attitude to 41-3, 49-50, 61, 63; Catroux and 49, 72-3; Dentz and 25, 26; formation of government by 79-82; Free French attitude to 44-8, 49; and national strike, 1941 30-1; outside support for 75-7; regrouping of 26-30; relations with French 82-5; Puaux and 16, 18, 25; and Taj al-Din 49-50, 54-60

Nokrashi, Mahmoud 210, 219

Novikov (Soviet ambassador in Cairo) 126-8

OCP (Organisation des Céréales Planifiés) 93

Oliva-Roget, Colonel 87, 98, 109, 165; on armed conflict 210, 211, 212, 216, 28, 220; and crisis over July 14 celebrations 128-30, 131; at Franco-Syrian talks 89, 136, 150, 153, 156, 203; and Mardam 95, 96, 100-1, 102, 106, 124-5, 132-3; recommends plot to overthrow government 131; report on Syrian attitude 99-100, 108; and Syrian demands for arms for police 122-3

Ostrorog, Stanislas 110-11, 117, 127, 128, 131, 133, 136-7, 203; at Franco-Syrian talks, 1944 150-64 (passim); and Mardam 177, 178-9, 195

Pachachi, Hamdi al- 219

Paget, General 149, 208, 213; and armed conflict 209, 211; and arms for police 140-1; takes over command 220, 221
Palestine 189; demonstrations in 26; Nahas Pasha in 77; and Syria 11, 13, 52

Palestine Post 125, 132, 137, 194

partition 73

Paulet-Newcomb Agreement, 1922 11

Peace Conference, Versailles 1919 8

People's Party 2

Peterson, Maurice 64, 106

Pharaon, Henri 199, 200, 203, 204, 212

political detainees 82–3; release of 33

political reform 24–5, 30, 67

Popular Front 81

Proclamation of Independence, 1941 50, 72, 90, 108

Puaux, Gabriel 15–18, 22–4; and assassination of al-Shahbandar 18–19

Quwatli, Shukri al-, President of Syria 5, 29, 50, 55, 70, 79, 120, 172; and assassination of al-Shahbandar 19, 20; and British 174, 175, 177–8; British attitude to 42, 60, 133, 192; and Churchill 147, 179–81, 221; declares war on Axis 182–3; and French 130, 131, 132, 134–5, 136–7, 165; illness of 206, 214; and Lebanese crisis 101; and National Bloc 23, 26, 27, 74, 75, 76; and national strike 30, 32; rejects negotiations with France 222; and Syrian independence 33, 138, 141; and Transjordan 183; and USA 201; visits Saudi Arabia and Egypt 179

Qudsi, Nazem al- 109

Rabbat, Edmond 20

Radwan, Fathi 218

Rayes, Najib al- 58, 59

religion 122

Rifaat, Khalil 21

Rifai, Abdel Monem al- 184, 218

Rifai, Samir al- 183, 184

Roosevelt, Franklin 75, 76, 105, 138, 148–9

Sadat, Anwar al- 4

Said, Nuri al- 11, 29, 51, 52, 76, 115, 167, 176

San Francisco Conference, Syria's admission to 183, 188–90

San Remo Conference, 1920 9

Sanhouri, al- 210

Saudi Arabia 28, 51, 77

security services 124–5

Shabani Treaty 3

Shahbandar, Abdel Rahman al- 2; assassination of 18–20

Shahbandar, Faisal al- 21

Shamir, Yitzhak 166

Shamiya, Tawfiq 80

Sharabati, Ahmad al- 106, 109

Sharif, Ihsan al- 21

Shawkat, Naji 34

Sherif Husain 7, 8

Shihabi, Moustafe al- 12

Shone, Terence 166, 176; and British policy in Syria 205; on Franco-Syrian relations 167, 170, 175; and French armed conflict 212, 213, 216, 217, 219, 221; and Mardam 177, 192, 202; and Quwatli 174, 192–3; and Syro-Lebanese communiqué 208

Shone, Taqi al-Din al- 87

Solh, R ld al- 4, 20, 85, 86, 87, 90, 95

Solh, Taqi al-Din al- 87

Solod (Soviet minister in Damascus) 149, 218

sovereignty 81, 108, 120, 156

Spears, Sir Edward 50, 94, 95; and Anglo-French talks 133–6; and armed forces 124; attitude of Foreign Office to 64, 65, 69, 78; and British policy in Syria 81, 189; Catroux and 48, 58, 59, 62; Churchill and 65, 117; and deportations 71; end of Spears Mission 165, 166; and Franco-Syrian relations 73, 120; and French 62–3, 64–5, 66; on invitation to Syrian leaders to visit Egypt 56; and Lebanese crisis 101–2, 104, 106; and political detainees 82–3; and Syrian elections 74, 80; and Syrian negotiations 137–44, 149, 164; and transfer of administrative powers 113–14, 117

Stalin, Joseph 138

Stirling, Colonel 219

student demonstrations 172, 173, 210

Sûreté 93, 116, 118

Suweidi, Naji al- 35

Sykes-Picot Agreement xi, 7
Syria  5-10; agreement with France on transfer of administrative powers 111-14; Allied invasion of 38-41; Anglo-French relations in 60-6; attitude to treaty with French 83, 84, 89, 135, 187; declaration of war on Axis 182-3; division of 11; July 14 celebrations in 128-30; and the Mandate 10-14; and Lebanon 83, 85-6, 91, 95, 96, 98-101, 182, 191, 216; nationalist activities in 56-7, 68-9; resistance to French demands 205-8; threat of Axis occupation 37, 38; and Transjordan 183-4; treaty with Great Britain 175-6; and Vichy France 15-35; in World War II 22
Syrian Congress 9, 10
Syro-Lebanese communiqué 206, 208

Takla, Salim 87, 126, 158-61
Talal, Emir 184
Transjordan 157; demonstrations in 216; tension with Syria 183-4
Treaty of Alliance 162, 163
Troupes Spéciales 116, 120, 129;
  Beynet on 169, 182, 186; desertions from 210, 213, 218, 223; French position on 119, 169, 180, 192, 204, 208, 211; Mardam on 167, 168, 193; negotiations over 123-5, 136, 141-2, 143, 158-9, 162; Syrian proposals for 119, 205
Truman, Harry 220
Turkey xi-xii, 6, 7, 34, 35; and Syria 11, 32, 37, 38
Ulshi, Jamil al- 69, 71
Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR): recognition of Syrian independence by 126-8, 135, 149-50; support for Syria 176, 179, 208, 218
United Nations 81, 181, 182, 186, 225
United States of America 208; and Arabs 8, 114-15; attitude to Franco-Syrian relations 184-6; and British policy in Syria 172, 176; and French armed conflict 215-16, 217; and French in Syria 65, 69, 199, 200, 201; support for Syria 147-9, 179; and Syrian independence 51, 52-3, 75-6, 83-4, 135
Varley (of US embassy in Damascus) 102
Vichy France 108; and Syria 15, 23-6, 38, 41
Viénot, Pierre 12, 45

Wadsworth, George 102, 128, 148, 193; and British policy in the Levant 143, 175, 185; and French troops in Syria 199-201, 213; and Mardam 83, 104, 199; and Syrian invitation to San Francisco 190
Weizmann, Haim 13
Weld-Forester, Haim 38, 46
Wilson, Woodrow 8
World War I 7
World War II 22, 37-8
Yemen 28
Young, George 199, 201, 211, 212, 213, 216
Zuraiq, Constantine 193