1
Crossing the Mediterranean

In the spring of 1798, the French port town of Toulon was unusually busy. Tens of thousands of soldiers, sailors, physicians, cartographers, engineers, and savants that had gathered there in April and early May were now making their final preparations for France's next major military expedition.[1] Few of them, however, knew their destination.[2] The secret had been masterfully kept by their young general, the Corsican Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821), in order to protect his forces from an enemy assault. He knew that the British navy, commanded by Admiral Horatio Nelson (1758–1805), was patrolling the Mediterranean so as to locate and devastate French ships.

In the town, and indeed across all Europe, rumours spread around as to what the target of the expedition would be. Many believed that the French army would turn west and then sail toward Britain for an unexpected offensive. Some claimed they would occupy Portugal. But when experts of Arab culture and language were summoned to the port days before the expedition, rumours that it would sail for Egypt became prevalent.[3] They were right.

Having lost her toehold in the south of India at Pondicherry to the British, France was looking to deal, in the words of Bonaparte, 'the surest and most palpable blow' on 'perfidious Albion'.[4] Even though her ultimate object was to attack Britain and thus knock out France's archenemy, a more realistic option for now could be to cut her 'jugular vein'.[5] Contact had been established with anti-British Persian and Indian elites such as Feth Ali and Tipoo Sultan of Mysore with the aim of forging allegiances.[6] To complement these machinations France would seize a proper eastern Mediterranean naval base (Malta) and then occupy Egypt.[7]

[1] Alexander Mikaberidze, *The Napoleonic Wars: A Global History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 74.

[2] Vivant Denon, *Travels in Upper and Lower Egypt, in Company with Several Divisions of the French army, during the Campaign of Napoleon Bonaparte in that country*, trans. Arthur Aitkin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 30.

[3] Cole, *Napoleon's Egypt*, 1.

[4] Alain Silvera, 'Egypt and the French Revolution, 1798–1801', *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer* 269(257) (1982): 307.

[5] Robert T. Harrison, *Britain and the Middle East, 1619–1971* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 26.

[6] Cole, *Napoleon's Egypt*, 11.

[7] M. Jacques Bainville, 'L'Expédition française', in *Précis de l'histoire de l'Égypte. L'Égypte ottomane, l'expédition française en Égypte et le règne de Mohamed-Aly (1517–1849)*, vol. 3, ed. Etienne Combe, Jacques Bainville, Edouard Driault (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire, 1933), 131–6; Edward Ingram, *Commitment to Empire: Prophecies of the Great Game in Asia, 1797–1800* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 42–52; Pascal Firges, *French Revolutionaries in the Ottoman Empire:*

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Thus had Bonaparte and foreign minister Charles Maurice de Talleyrand (1754–1838) planned since the previous year, and their scheme for an expedition was approved by the Directory regime in March 1798. It was now time to bring the plan to fruition.

On 19 May, when the French Army of the Orient set sail across the 'indigo Mediterranean' for the unknowns awaiting them in the Levant, the 54000 or so men at sea 'eroticised an Orient' they imagined to be stunning yet corrupt and backward.[8] They were spellbound by the allegedly grandiose importance of their mission. On the day of their departure, Bonaparte told his men that the eyes of Europe were on them, and that the conquests they were about to undertake would have a colossal effect on the 'civilization and commerce of the world'.[9]

Map 1. The French expedition to Egypt

That the expedition did not go as planned is well known. Three years after they landed in Alexandria in July 1798, the French army was driven out from Egypt by joint Anglo-Ottoman forces and the resistance of the local inhabitants. Yet the expedition did indeed have a transformative impact on Ottoman, Egyptian, and European politics and commerce in several ways.

Not that it succeeded in 'civilizing the Levant' or inaugurated a period of capitalist and bureaucratic modernity in the Middle East. These orientalist

Diplomacy, Political Culture and the Limiting of Universal Revolution, 1792–1798 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 89.

[8] Cole, *Napoleon's Egypt*, 8, 10–11.

[9] 'Au soldats de terre et de mer de l'armée de la Méditerranée', 10 May 1798, in *Correspondance de Napoléon Ier*, vol. 4 (Paris: Impériale Première, 1860), 129; Cole, *Napoleon's Egypt*, 11. Bonaparte's men found out that the final destination of the expedition was Egypt only after the conquest of Malta.

postulations have long been unravelled by the revisionist literature.[10] What changed in 1798 is not limited to the well-known fact that the Levant was drawn into the cortex of global imperial rivalry and an Anglo-French competition for economic and strategic domination in this part of the world began, or to the fact that the foundations for the scientific study of the Orient were laid out.

As we will see, the invasion also epitomized a discursive practice whereby European Great Powers of the time looked to supply security beyond their imperial territories (in the Levant) by military expeditions, allegedly for the benefit of the locals even if against the will of the regional sovereigns—in this case, the Ottoman imperial rulers.[11] The architects of the 1798 occupation, Bonaparte and Talleyrand, portrayed their expedition as one for the benefit of Selim III. It was not a hostile invasion, they argued, but a '*grand service*' to the sultan. Talleyrand even planned a visit to Istanbul to convince the Ottoman authorities of the good will of

[10] See e.g. Peter Gran, *Islamic Roots of Capitalism: Egypt, 1760–1840* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998). I would like to thank Isa Blumi for drawing my attention to this source.

[11] After the Crusades, perhaps no other Western occupation in the Levant has attracted as much scholarly attention as the French expedition to Egypt in 1798. Many volumes have been produced on the subject, some even emerging before French forces evacuated the Levant in 1801. Louis-Alexandre Berthier, *Relation des campagnes du General Bonaparte en Égypte et en Syrie* (Paris: P. Didot l'aîné, 1800); *Copies of Original Letters from the Army of General Bonaparte in Egypt: Intercepted by the Fleet under the Command of Admiral Lord Nelson* (London: J. Wright, 1798); Shmuel Moreh, 'Reputed Autographs of 'Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti and Related Problems', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 28 (1965): 524–40; Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, 'A Comparative Study of 'Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti and Niqula al-Turk', in *Eighteenth-Century Egypt: The Arabic Manuscript Sources*, ed. Daniel Crecelius (Claremont, CA: Regina Books, 1991), 115–26; cf. Darrely Dykstra, 'The French Occupation of Egypt, 1798–1801', in *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, vol. 2: *Modern Egypt from 1517 to the End of the Twentieth Century*, ed. M. W. Daly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 113–14. Detailed analyses have been made on the military aspects of the expedition. E.g. Clément Étienne de La Jonquière, *L'Expédition d'Égypte*, 5 vols (Paris, 1899–1907); cf. Dykstra, 'The French Occupation', 114. Bonaparte's character and adventures during his Oriental odyssey have been placed under analysis in a plethora of work. Percival G. Elgood, *Bonaparte's Adventure in Egypt* (London: Oxford University Press, 1931); François Charles-Roux, *Bonaparte, gouverneur d'Égypte* (Paris: Plon, 1936); and J. Christopher Herold, *Bonaparte in Egypt* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962); cf. Dykstra, 'The French Occupation', 115. More recently, Cole, *Napoleon's Egypt*; Irena A. Bierman (ed.), *Napoleon in Egypt* (Los Angeles, CA: Ithaca Press, 2003). Dykstra explains that Arab scholars have more recently reconstructed the history of the expedition as the first example of Western imperialist encroachment and the heroic domestic (Arab) resistance to it. E.g. Muhammad Qindil al-Baqli, *Abtalal-muqawamab al-sha'abiyah li-l'hamla al-faransiya fi misr* (Cairo: n.d.); 'Abd al-Aziz al-Shinawi, *'Umar makram: batal al muqawamab al-sha'biyyah* (Cairo, 1967); 'Abd al-'Aziz Hafiz Dunya, *al-Shabid muhammad kurayyim* (Cairo, n.d.; Muhammad Faraj, *al-Nidal al-sha'bi diddal Hamla al-faransiyya* (Cairo, 1963); cf. Dykstra, 'The French Occupation', 115. European nationalist literature has likewise wrought its own heroic stories out of the expedition—the stories of Admiral Nelson, General Kleber, Admiral Sidney Smith: see Christopher Herold, *Bonaparte in Egypt* (Tucson, AZ: Fireship Press, 2009); Christopher Lloyd, *The Nile Campaign: Bonaparte and Nelson in Egypt* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1973). And a number of studies have detailed the expedition's political, economic, and intellectual origins: François Charles-Roux, *Les Origines de l'expédition de l'Égypte* (Paris: Plon-Nourrit, 1910); and *Le projet français de conquête de l'Égypte sous le règne de Louis XVI* (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire, 1929); 'France, Égypte et Mer Rouge de 1715 à 1798', *Cahiers d'histoire égyptienne* 3 (1951): 117–95.

France, and to reassure them that the aim of the expedition was only to overthrow the Mamluks who menaced the sultan's authority in Egypt.[12]

In reality, the 1798 expedition was the outcome of a diverse set of geostrategic, political, economic, and financial determinants that constituted the Eastern Question of the time. This chapter will consider these constituent determinants, before turning in the following two chapters to the repercussions of this first major European imperial intervention in the Levant—the repercussions that Talleyrand and Bonaparte failed to see or, perhaps, chose to ignore. What did the Eastern Question pertain to before the nineteenth century then? And how did 1798 relate to it? I will examine these two questions first.

Defining the 'Eastern Question'

Since its conquest of south-eastern European territories in the fourteenth century, the dynasty of Osman Bey, later styled the Ottoman Empire, became a chief source of danger and invulnerability in the political imagination of her western neighbours.[13] The Ottomans remained so for at least three centuries thanks to the relative military prowess which rested on their effective management of human and economic resources across a territory that stretched from Hungary and the Crimea in the north to Yemen in the south, and from Algiers and Tunis in the west to Iraq in the east, and because of their continuous expansionism and drive for universal empire.[14]

The epic rivalry between the Ottoman Empire, on the one hand, and Spain, Venice, and the Habsburg Empire, on the other, in the Mediterranean as well as in the Balkans fostered in the sixteenth century alone the publication of more than 3,500 titles in Europe about the 'Turks'—a literature also known as 'Turcica'.[15] In this literature, the Ottoman imperial system was often depicted as a 'menace' to European peace and order, and as the 'Islamic other', the 'oriental' being associated with dread, danger, and atrocities while at the same time

[12] Bonaparte to Citoyen Talleyrand, Ambassadeur à Constantinople, 11 Dec. 1798, *Correspondance V*, 203. See also Silvera, 'Egypt and the French Revolution', 313.

[13] For excellent analyses, see Noel Malcolm, *Useful Enemies: Islam and the Ottoman Empire in Western Political Thought, 1450–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 68, 70, 72, and Selim Deringil, 'The Turks and "Europe": The Argument from History', *Middle Eastern Studies* 43(5) (Sept. 2007): 709–23.

[14] Gábor Ágoston, 'The Ottoman Empire and Europe', in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern European History, 1350–1750*, vol. 2: *Cultures and Power*, ed. Hamish Scott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 626.

[15] Ibid. See also Aslı Çırakman, *From the 'Terror of the World' to the 'Sick Man of Europe': European Images of Ottoman Empire and Society from the Sixteenth Century to the Nineteenth* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001); Alain Grosrichard, *The Sultan's Court: European Fantasies of the East* (New York: Verso, 1998).

peripheralized as 'exotic, unchanging and acted upon by the Powers of ruling authorities in Europe'.[16]

In reality, there was hardly a 'cultural iron curtain' between the Ottoman world and its western neighbours.[17] Their relations were always characterized by complex diplomatic, commercial, and economic liaisons and exchanges.[18] Despite religious demarcations, and in spite of the beliefs upheld by such figures as Martin Luther and Desiderius Erasmus that the 'Turks' were 'the sheer wrath of God' towards Christians, the Ottomans continually participated in inter-imperial cooperation with their Christian neighbours in politics, commerce, and even military campaigns.[19] And they were 'actively engaged with and in [the emerging European state] system' all the while as a balancer, with their alliances and support for the rivals of the Habsburgs.[20] In other words, the sultans' empire was part and parcel of European strategic and security considerations from the beginning.

In Europe, in fact, the term 'security' did not become an organizing principle of international thought until the early decades of the nineteenth century. Derived from the Latin term *securus* (*sine* 'without', *cura* 'worry'), its early usage in the Roman context—*animi securitas*—referred to peace of mind and stability in the inner conditions of the state.[21] Over centuries new meanings were attached to 'security' in both a moral and a political sense. It was associated with indolence in early Christianity, in the Middle Ages, and also by Reformers such as Calvin, and with peace and order under the Holy Roman and Habsburg empires which postured 'as protecting shields for Christians' and enabled the delivery of 'imperial goods'.[22]

[16] Daniel Goffman, *The Ottoman Empire and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 5. See also Edhem Eldem, 'Istanbul: From Imperial to Peripheralized Capital', in *The Ottoman City between East and West: Aleppo, Izmir and Istanbul*, ed. Edhem Eldem, Daniel Goffman, and Bruce Masters (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 138.

[17] Halil İnalcık, 'The Meaning of Legacy: The Ottoman Case', in *Imperial Legacy: The Ottoman Imprint on the Balkans and the Middle East*, ed. L. Carl Brown (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 21–3; Molly Greene, *A Shared World: Christians and Muslims in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Suraiya N. Faroqhi, *The Ottoman Empire and the World Around It* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004); Ian Coller, 'East of Enlightenment: Regulating Cosmopolitanism between Istanbul and Paris in the Eighteenth Century', *Journal of World History* 21(3) (2010): 447–70; John-Paul A. Ghobrial, *The Whispers of Cities: Information Flows in Istanbul, London, and Paris in the Age of William Trumbull* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); cf. Firges, *French Revolutionaries*, 4.

[18] Ágoston, 'The Ottoman Empire', 626. İnalcık argues us that 'the idea of a Europe unified on the basis of Christian ideology and a holy war against the Ottomans' was likewise 'either a myth or an effort to exploit public opinion in Europe in order to legitimize the policies of the individual states': İnalcık, 'The Meaning of Legacy', 21. See also K. M. Setton, *The Papacy and the Levant, 1204–1571*, 4 vols (Philadelphia, PA: American Philosophical Society, 1976), 84.

[19] Malcolm, *Useful Enemies*, 81.

[20] A. Nuri Yurdusev, 'The Middle East Encounter with the Expansion of European International Society', in *International Society and the Middle East: English School Theory at the Regional Level*, ed. Barry Buzan and Ana Gonzalez-Pelaez (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 71, 73, 74.

[21] Ole Waever, 'Security: A Conceptual History for International Relations' (MS, Copenhagen, 2012), 24–5.

[22] Ibid. 33–5.

The Ottomans were both 'the alien other' to be guarded against and at the same time a major determinant in the strategic calculations of princes and kings. In the sixteenth century, Francis I of France acknowledged the sultan's empire as 'the only force to prevent the emerging states of Europe from being transformed into a Europe-wide empire by Charles V', while the English Queen Elizabeth I considered that 'the sultan could balance the Habsburgs in the East and consequently relieve Spanish pressure upon England', even arguing that 'Protestantism and Islam were equally hostile to "idolatry"'.[23]

The Ottoman sultans, for their part, keenly sought to influence their western neighbours' politics according to the interests of their empire, with the belief that the European balance of power, which at the time meant the prevention of Habsburg domination of its Protestant rivals, was 'useful and perhaps sometimes essential' to maintaining their political sway.[24] In this period, what would later prove to be a major source of weakness for the Ottoman Empire, the capitulations, were introduced as commercial and legal privileges granted to European merchants in Ottoman lands and seas. They 'began their career', to cite Özsu, 'as instruments of Ottoman, not European, imperialism'.[25] Ottoman officials made a conscious effort to hamper the dominance of one state in Levantine trade by favouring rival nations, pitting one Italian state against the other, and the British and the Dutch against the French.[26] With the capitulations, they also looked to tie the major Powers of Europe to the political interests of the sultans.

All these dynamics gradually changed with the turn of the eighteenth century. The equilibrium of military power that characterized the sultan's relations with his western neighbours was unsettled. A pivotal factor here was the rise of the Romanovs in the northeast, but at play more decisively were a complex set of domestic and international developments, such as (if I may simplify a little) the detrimental socioeconomic repercussions of the swollen number of Ottoman soldiers in peacetime, the dwindling economic importance of the sultan's lands after the discovery of the Americas, the advance of political, economic, military, and technological modes of power in Europe largely thanks to new geographical

[23] Ibid. 73; Herbert Butterfield, 'The Balance of Power', in *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Politics*, ed. Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966), 143; Roderic H. Davison, 'Ottoman Diplomacy and its Legacy', in *Imperial Legacy*, 174–99; Roderic H. Davison, 'The Westernization of the Ottoman Diplomacy in the Nineteenth Century', in *National and International Politics in the Middle East*, ed. Edward Ingram (London: Frank Cass, 1986), 54–65; Deringil, 'The Turks', 709.

[24] G. R. Berridge, 'Diplomatic Integration with Europe before Selim III', in *Ottoman Diplomacy: Conventional or Unconventional*, ed. A. Nuri Yurdusev (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 114; Yurdusev, 'The Middle East Encounter', 72–3.

[25] Özsu, 'Ottoman Empire', 446.

[26] On Ottoman imperialism through capitulations, see esp. Halil İnalcık, *The Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and Halil İnalcık, 'The Turkish Impact on the Development of Modern Europe', in *The Ottoman State and its Place in World History*, ed. Kemal H. Karpat (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 51–8.

discoveries and the triangular (African slave) trade, and subsequently the uneven and combined development of societies all over the globe which adversely affected the Ottoman world.[27] Historians tend to agree that after the failed siege of Vienna in 1683 the Ottoman military defeats at the hands of the armies of the Holy League (Russia, Austria, Sweden), the conclusion of the Peace of Carlowitz (1699), and the almost incessant loss of lands thereafter reflected a shift from balance to imbalance of power in the Ottoman Empire's relations with her western neighbours.[28]

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At the turn of the eighteenth century, the emergence and expansion of the Romanovs into Ottoman dominions pressured Istanbul to follow a more defensive policy. The sultans gradually and grudgingly adhered to European norms and notions in international law. According to Rifa'at Abbou-El-Haj, the negotiated agreements of 1699 and 1700 between the Ottoman Empire and the Holy League 'implied in their territorial delimitations at least two modern principles of international law: acceptance of a political boundary and adherence to the concept of the inviolability of the territory of a sovereign state.'[29] A Venetian participant in the peace negotiations, Cavaliere Carlo Ruzzini, similarly noted: 'It certainly was an object of admiration of the world as well as a rare case in the memory of history to see the Turks willing to submit to negotiation as equals with others and to tolerate the slow formalities of that method.'[30] From then on, observing the military discipline and technological advances of their western rivals, the Ottoman elites admitted the importance of peace in their relations and acted in

[27] For sociological analyses on the subject, see e.g. Kerem Nişancıoğlu, 'Combination as "Foreign Policy": The Intersocietal Origins of the Ottoman Empire', in *Historical Sociology and World History: Uneven and Combined Development over the Longue Durée*, ed. Alexander Anievas and Kamran Matin (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 73–92; in the same volume, Jamie Allison, 'Revisiting the Transformation of the Nineteenth Century and the "Eastern Question": Uneven and Combined Development and the Ottoman Steppe', 93–110. Even though a large body of work since the 18th c. has argued that the power differentials between the Ottoman Empire and its Western neighbours resulted mainly from an alleged 'Ottoman decline', this argument has recently been called into serious question. Revisionist scholars have drawn attention to the repercussions for the sultan's empire of global uneven and combined development and the need to evaluate Ottoman power in juxtaposition to her rivals, yet not simply as an organic unit in the Ibn Haldunic sense that rises, stagnates, and declines in isolation from its international environment. E.g. Cemal Kafadar, 'The Question of Ottoman Decline', *Harvard Middle East and Islamic Review* 4(1–2) (1999): 30–75; Jonathan Grant, 'Rethinking the Ottoman Decline: Military Technology Diffusion in the Ottoman Empire, Fifteenth to Eighteenth Centuries', *Journal of World History* 10(1) (1999): 179–201; Caroline Finkel, '"The Treacherous Cleverness of Hindsight": Myths of Ottoman Decay', in *Re-Orienting the Renaissance: Cultural Exchange with the East*, ed. Gerald M. Maclean (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 148–74.

[28] Fikret Adanır, 'Turkey's Entry into the Concert of Europe', *European Review* 13(3) (2005): 397; Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1964), 24.

[29] R. A. Abou-El-Haj, 'The Formal Closure of the Ottoman Frontier in Europe: 1699–1703', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 89 (1969): 467–75, at 468; also see his 'Ottoman Attitudes toward Peace Making: The Karlowitz Case', *Der Islam* 51 (1974): 131–7; Adanır, 'Turkey's Entry', 397.

[30] Abou-El-Haj, 'Ottoman Attitudes', 131.

accordance with the norms of *jus publicum Europeum*. They would accept for the first time 'a Christian power as a mediator' and 'a neutral ground as the location of negotiations' in the early eighteenth century.[31]

At this juncture, the 'Turk' was still symbolic of danger in the European imagination.[32] This was no longer because of the military might they possessed, however, but rather because of the alleged lack thereof. In 1715, an Austrian envoy in Istanbul would (a little exaggeratedly) report that the empire of the sultan had become so weak that 'a Habsburg army could march with ease to the Ottoman capital, and expel the Turks from Europe altogether'.[33] One might, at least prima facie, conclude that the purported predicament of the Ottomans meant a reduced threat for Austria at their southeastern borders. However, an altogether different picture dictated European political considerations thence.

The fact that Russia contemplated the perceived feebleness of the Porte as an opportunity 'first to expand to the Black Sea, then into the Balkans, and finally to Constantinople' engendered for the courts of Europe, and—due to her geographical proximity—especially for Vienna, a new source of threat from the 1760s.[34] Afterwards, the fate of the Ottoman Empire became a matter of haggling among the major Powers for sustaining the European balance of power, which now came to mean also the prevention of Russian aggrandizements in the south or simply her control over the Straits and the prized parts of the Levant and Asia Minor.

The Romanovs' policy with respect to their southern neighbours changed incongruously in accordance with the predilections of each monarch that came to the throne.[35] Even though under Tsar Peter I (r. 1682–1725) an 'eternal peace' had been proclaimed between St Petersburg and Istanbul, during the reign of Anna Ioannovna (r. 1730–40), the idea of complete destruction of the Ottoman Empire gained traction among Russian military officers and rulers. When Catherine II (r. 1762–95) ascended to the throne, she saw that the future of her empire lay in the political and economic initiatives to be taken in the south.[36] The annexation of the Crimea became a major security objective, both to suppress the

[31] Adanır, 'Turkey's Entry', 398–9; Fatma Müge Göçek, *East Encounters West: France and the Ottoman Empire in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

[32] Çırakman, *From the 'Terror of the World'*.

[33] Karl A. Roider, Jr, *Austria's Eastern Question* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 4–5.

[34] Ibid. 47–8, 194.

[35] Alexander Bitis, *Russia and the Eastern Question: Army, Government, and Society, 1815–1833* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 19–26.

[36] L. A. Nikiforov, *Vneshnyaya Politika Rossii v Poslednie Godi Severnoj Vojny* (Moscow: Nishtadtskij Mir, 1959); V. P. Lyscov, *Persidskij Pohod Petra I* (Moscow: n.p., 1950); A. K. Bajov, *Russkaya Armiya v Tsarstvovanie Imperatricy Anny Ioannovny: Vojna Rossii s Turciej, V, 1736–1739* (St Petersburg: n.p., 1906), 199. For a recent account of Catherine's southern policy, see Kelly O'Neill, *Claiming Crimea: A History of Catherine the Great's Southern Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017).

endless raids of the Crimean Tatars and to gain a foothold at the Black Sea.[37] During her reign, border disputes in the Balkans, Ottoman opposition to the partition of Poland, and the situation of the Crimea prompted two major wars with the Sublime Porte in the second half of the eighteenth century.

The first of these wars, in 1768–74, saw Russian engagements in the eastern Mediterranean coasts—our focal region in this book—in order to foment Mamluk and Druze revolts against the Ottoman sultan. However, Russia's interests lay mainly at the northern Black Sea, and her ephemeral engagement in Egypt and Syria barely created a global shift of political attention at the time. The signing of the Küçük Kaynarca Treaty of peace in 1774, by contrast, did. With this treaty, Russia obtained several ports on the Black Sea, the right of free navigation for her merchant marine in the Straits and the Mediterranean, favourable commercial concessions for merchants, and 'the right to make representations at the Porte on behalf of the Orthodox Christian subjects of the sultan'.[38] The Crimea was granted the status of an independent khanate, which Russia could now easily influence.

The 1774 treaty is usually considered in historical literature as the beginning of the 'Eastern Question', though the term was possibly never used by the historical actors in the late eighteenth century.[39] It is true that the new Russian foothold on the shores of the Black Sea was viewed by her western neighbours, and particularly by the Habsburgs, with dread, as a tragedy for Sultan Abdülhamid I (1725–89), but also as a danger for European peace. The treaty's provisions, as Johann Amadeus von Thugut (1736–1818), the Austrian internuncio in Istanbul wrote, contained 'a grim portent for the future'. With their ports in the Black Sea, the Russians could now launch 'an amphibious assault' directly at Istanbul, bringing 20,000 men in about 36 hours or even less, and end the Ottoman Empire before the news of occupation reached Vienna, the nearest major European capital.[40] The risk of destabilizing the power balance among major European Powers was more present than ever. This was why Thugut would conclude that that the treaty was a terrible blow not merely to the sultan's empire but 'to the rest of the world'.[41]

For Austria, the existence of a weaker Ottoman Empire as a southeastern neighbour was welcome; but a strong Russia would threaten Austrian interests even more gravely.[42] The difficulty for the Court of Vienna lay in the fact that it

[37] E. I. Druzhinina, *Kyuchuk-Kajnardzhijskij Mir 1774 goda* (Moscow: Ego Podgotovka i Zaklyuchenie, 1955), 65, 66; S. F. Oreshkova, 'Osmanskaya imperiya i Rossiya v svete ih geopoliticheskogo razgranicheniya', *Voprosy istorii. Ezhemesyachnyj zhurnal* 3 (2005): 40.

[38] Adanır, 'Turkey's Entry', 401. See also Roderick H. Davison, '"Russian Skill and Turkish Imbecility": The Treaty of Kuchuk Kainardji Reconsidered', *Slavic Review* 35 (1976): 463–83; Brian L. Davies, *The Russo-Turkish War, 1768–1774: Catherine II And The Ottoman Empire* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

[39] Anderson, *The Eastern Question*; Roider, *Austria's Eastern Question*.

[40] Roider, *Austria's Eastern Question*, 152.

[41] Thugut to Kaunitz, 3 Sept. 1774; cf. Roider, *Austria's Eastern Question*, 152.

[42] Ibid. 154.

was too risky to fight the Romanovs for the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire. Yet at the same time the Habsburg rulers were aware that, if Austria formed an alliance with the Romanovs and joined the partition of the sultan's empire, they could gain a strategic advantage over their Prussian rivals in the north, which could spark a war with the latter.

This persistent dilemma formed the underlying element of what Roider calls Austria's emerging 'Eastern Question' during the course of the eighteenth century. It soon became a question for the other major Powers to grapple with too: would European Powers fight with each other for the destruction of the allegedly precarious Ottoman Empire or collaborate in her partition and establish new, more dangerous neighbourhoods with powerful rivals, as happened after the partitions of Poland in 1772, 1793, and 1795? Or would they neutralize the threat by preventing the fall of the empire so that no European power could seize her most prized domains and upset the European balance? How could all major European Powers enjoy the same commercial privileges, given that the Russian merchants had now acquired a privileged status? The Ottoman Empire came to be seen at this juncture as an object of these strategic and economic considerations, as the 'acted upon' whose fate was to be decided by European imperial rulers who drastically lacked knowledge of her realities.

The Austrian response to these questions was to maintain the Ottoman territorial status quo as much as possible, and contain Russian aggression toward Istanbul. This could be obtained, not by confronting the Romanovs, but rather in forming reluctant alliances *against* the Ottomans to hold in check Russian aggrandizement.[43] For example, in 1782 the Austrian King Joseph II accepted Empress Catherine II's infamous 'Greek Project', i.e. the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of a new Greek empire in her place, with a capital at 'Constantinople' and her grandson, Constantin, as the emperor. But Joseph II vacillated, desiring the involvement of France. When the plan failed after disagreements between the two Powers concerning their policy over Prussia, the Austrian king was not overly disappointed.[44]

The formula of cooperation to compromise belligerent competition was implemented time and again, set a precedent for European inter-imperial politics in the nineteenth century, and formed the core of the nascent transimperial security culture that grew around the Eastern Question. The latter was hardly ever a monolithic question. It came with multiple propositions, sub-questions, and risks that some were ready to take and others dared not. In each historical moment, it not only maintained pseudo-divisions between the so-called European world and the Ottoman Empire, but also engendered the emergence of rival camps among the ruling elites of the major Powers in Europe with respect to how to

[43] Ibid. 161. [44] Ibid. 162, 164.

tackle it. These differences of opinions were fundamental in understanding the policies and key decisions of the Powers towards the Ottomans in the late eighteenth century. They were fundamental also in understanding why France decided to invade Egypt in 1798, and how it was framed as a 'service' to the Ottoman sultan.

France and the Ottoman Empire

Franco-Ottoman relations in the eighteenth century were oftentimes characterized by mutual succour and warm gestures.[45] In 1739, for instance, after the sultan's disastrous war with Russia, the ambassador of France, the Marquis L. S. Villeneuve (1675–1745), acted as an intermediary in concluding peace with not too unfavourable conditions for Istanbul. The Ottoman administration had then considered him almost a saviour, and agreed to grant France new capitulations in 1740 that made the latter the Porte's 'most favoured nation'.[46] In 1768, it was France that had encouraged Sultan Mustafa III to declare war on Russia in order to have a say in the Polish question.[47] And in 1774, after the signing of the humiliating Küçük Kaynarca Treaty, the Ottoman ministers had received the support of Paris in slowing down the implementation of the treaty's stipulations.[48]

Yet it was also then, around the time of the 1774 Treaty, as major European Powers came to believe more firmly in the inability of the Ottoman Empire to defend herself against a strong European military, two opposing political groups emerged within France, each putting forward diametrically opposite policies on how best to deal with the perceived feebleness of the sultan's empire. The so-called '*clan interventionniste*' gathered around the *Secrétaire d'État de la Marine* and advocated abandoning the Ottoman Empire and sharing her lands with Russia and Austria, with France's share consisting mainly of Egypt.[49]

Previously, Cardinal Richelieu (1585–1642) and the German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) had both advocated the geopolitical and strategic importance of establishing a strong French influence in Egypt, calling the latter 'the Netherlands of the East' due to its strategic location as a maritime

[45] İsmail Soysal, *Fransız İhtilali ve Türk-Fransız Diplomasi Münasebetleri (1789–1802)* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1987), 9–22; Orville T. Murphy, *Charles Gravier, Comte de Vergennes: French Diplomacy in the Age of Revolution, 1719–1787* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), 54.

[46] Oreshkova, 'Osmanskaya imperiya i Rossiya', 39; Özsu, 'Ottoman Empire', 434.

[47] Murphy, *Comte de Vergennes*, 151–61; Munro Price, *Preserving the Monarchy: The Comte de Vergennes, 1774–1787* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 8.

[48] Rodier, *Austria's Eastern Question*, 152.

[49] Pascal W. Firges, 'Gunners for the Sultan: French Revolutionary Efforts to Modernize the Ottoman Military', in *Well-Connected Domains: Towards an Entangled Ottoman History*, ed. Pascal Firges, Christian Roth, Tobias P. Graf, and Gülay Tulasoğlu (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 180.

centre. Yet their suggestions had not been taken up by French strategists.[50] The idea had been resuscitated in the mid-eighteenth century with the reports of the two foreign ministers René Louis d'Argenson (1744–7) and especially Étienne-François (duc) de Choiseul (1758–70), both of whom stressed the economic importance of annexing this rich country.

The appeals for an invasion of Egypt found inspiration partly amid the mounting food crises and economic and financial suffering in the south of France and in part in the strategic considerations of Paris. As the historian Peter Gran rightly argues, 'France became increasingly interested in Egypt as a source of grain, especially to supply the region of Marseille', in times of poor harvests, inflation, and grain crises.[51] Yet at the same time, following the expansion of the Austrians and Russians into the borders of the eastern Mediterranean, and especially after the 1774 treaty, the European balance was close to being unsettled. Britain had managed to compensate for the loss of its thirteen colonies in the Americas by the conquest of India. And the diplomatic attention in Europe was recentring on a region that stretched from Poland to Egypt, with the Ottoman Empire remaining in between.[52] France had to make her own move now.

The 1774 pamphlet written by the leader of the interventionists, the first clerk of the Ministry of the Navy, Jean-Charles-Nicolas Amé de Saint-Didier (1740–81), underscored that the French should occupy Egypt to conserve her trade in the Levant.[53] Another outspoken member of the group was the famous Franco-Hungarian military officer François baron de Tott (1733–93), who had served under the authority of Sultan Mustafa III, reforming the Ottoman military during the 1768–74 war.[54] After the war, disgruntled by the lack of gratitude shown to him by the Ottomans, he had become a 'prophet of the impending disintegration of the Ottoman Empire'. In 1777, de Tott was appointed as inspector general of the Levant, and after his trips to Egypt and Syria, he produced a report in 1779 which laid the basis of a project of the occupation Egypt. 'Can we not', he asked, 'see with certainty the imminent destruction of the Turkish Empire in Europe?' He supplied the answer himself: 'No event was ever announced by any more

[50] *Mémoire de Leibniz à Louis XIV, sur la conquête de l'Égypte*, ed. M. de Hoffmans (Paris, 1840); Albert Andal, *Louis XIV et l'Égypte* (Paris, 1889); Charles-Roux, *Les Origines*, 22; Jacques Frémeux, *La France et l'Islam depuis 1789* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991); Virginia Aksan, 'Choiseul-Gouffier at the Porte, 1784–1792', *Studies in Ottoman Diplomatic History* 4 (1990): 17–34; Ferenc Toth, 'Un Hongrois en Égypte avant Napoléon. La Mission secrète du baron de Tott', *Revue historique des armées* 270 (2013): 14.

[51] Gran, *Islamic*, liv, 7–10, 15.

[52] Henry Laurens, *Les Origines intellectuelles de l'expédition d'Égypte* (Istanbul: ISIS Yayımcılık, 1987), 174.

[53] Charles-Roux, *Le Projet français*, 18.

[54] Charles-Roux, *Les Origines*, 61–5; Virginia Aksan, 'Breaking the Spell of the Baron de Tott: Reframing the Question of Military Reform in the Ottoman Empire, 1760–1830', *International History Review* 24(2) (June 2002): 253–77.

certain signs, and never more interested in the political views of France and the interest of her commerce.'[55]

The interventionists' schemes were also inspired by the Austrian Emperor Joseph II. During his trip to France in 1777, and then later in 1783 (to speak about Catherine II's 'Greek Project' scheme), in fear of a Russian threat after the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, the Austrian emperor aimed to recruit France to the plan by twice proposing the occupation of Egypt, the richest province of the Ottoman Empire, to French authorities. However, Charles Gravier de Vergennes (1719–87), the minister of foreign affairs (1774–87) and a former ambassador to Istanbul (1755–68), stood in the way of the plan on both occasions.[56]

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Vergennes was the leading figure of the second group which opposed intervention in the Ottoman Empire and her dismemberment.[57] In fact, he himself also believed that the Ottoman Empire was in a state of decline. He also knew that French trade in the Levant needed to be conserved, especially in view of the fact that, after the successive wars fought in the Americas, the Bourbon monarchy was under serious fiscal pressure. Yet the solution he proposed diverged from that of the interventionists. He argued for strengthening the sultan's empire by employing 'all possible means to dispose [the Ottomans] to seek salvation in the study of science and particularly military art'.[58]

In 1783, when Vergennes opposed French involvement in the 'Greek Project', to lure him, Joseph II offered him Egypt. 'Egypt!' the Frenchman exclaimed. 'We would not accept those Muslims if you gave them to us. France neither wants nor needs new conquests.' If Austria annexed Ottoman territory to maintain the power equilibrium with Russia, he continued, then Prussia would want to grasp something to maintain 'the equilibrium with Austria, and so on ad infinitum. The stability of Europe would be completely undermined by such a chain reaction.'[59]

Vergennes moreover argued that with the partition of the Ottoman Empire, Russian control over her lands and the accompanying uncertainty it would bring

[55] Bibliothèque municipale de Versailles, série Mss L. 277 (Lebaudy Mss 4 120), *Inspection générale des Échelles du Levant et de Barbarie faite de l'ordre de Sa Majesté par Monsieur le Baron de Tott, tome I* f. 2–4; cf. Toth, 'Un Hongrois', 3. See also Christophe Farnaud, 'Culture et politique. La Mission secrète du baron de Tott au Levant (1776–1779)' (Mémoire de maîtrise, université de Paris-Sorbonne (Paris IV), 1988), 86–8.

[56] 'Réflexions sur l'empire ottomane', 1793, AMAE MD 15/154.

[57] Munro, *Preserving the Monarchy,* 195; Murphy, *Comte de Vergennes*, 339; Jean-François Labourdette, *Vergennes. Ministre principal du Louis XVI* (Paris: Desjonquères, 1990), 87–8.

[58] Pierre Duparc, *Recueil des instructions aux ambassadeurs et ministres de France*, vol. 29 (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1969), 475–8.

[59] Robert Salomon, *La Politique orientale de Vergennes* (Crimea: Les Presses Modernes, 1935), 179–89, 194–5.

stood against the commercial interests of France.[60] Indeed, on the eve of the French Revolution of 1789, there were more than 80 French commercial companies operating in the Ottoman territories thanks to the capitulatory privileges that had been granted to France in the sixteenth century and that had been revised in 1673 and 1740.[61] He would not want to jeopardize their future by immense political changes. Economic considerations, not strategic ones alone, had always been and would continue to be an integral component of the Eastern Question. Although this may seem obvious, as we will see in this book, their weight was actually greater in decision-making processes than has been shown in the literature to this day.

Under the influence and guidance of Vergennes, the French policy homed in on the preservation of the Ottoman Empire. In this period, France sent military advisers and instructors to Istanbul to teach at the Imperial Academy of Naval Engineering, which, as we will see in Chapter 2, created politically influential synergies between French and Ottoman officers and mathematicians.[62] The French also strove to prevent further Russian aggrandisement at the expense of the Ottoman Empire.

But, in the second half of the 1780s, Vergennes's hand was weakened by the news from Egypt, where the local Mamluk beys Ibrahim and Murad, forming an understanding with Britain, reportedly harassed French merchants, confiscating or destroying their properties.[63] The foreign minister was showered with petitions by merchants for French intervention, especially when the harvest in the autumn of 1788 was 'disastrously short', and the grain shortage became critical.[64] Even though his pressure on the Porte to take action against the Mamluk beys received a positive response, and in 1786 Sultan Abdülhamid I sent his grand admiral to Cairo on a punitive mission, the 'interventionists' could never make sense of his tenacity. At the death of Vergennes in 1787, Constantin François de Chassebœuf (1757–1820), another outspoken interventionist known for his famous travelogue on Egypt and Syria under the pseudonym Volney, wrote: 'By a bizarre prevention, [Vergennes] tried to stifle anything that might be detrimental to the Ottomans. I said a bizarre intervention, because it was without foundation . . . a bad policy, because the menaces . . . of the authority do not prevent the truth from reaching the light of day . . . '[65]

[60] Gouffier to Vergennes, 10 Jan. 1785, AMAE CP Turquie 172; Gouffier to Montmorin 10 May 1787, AMAE CP Turquie 175; cf. Soysal, *Fransız İhtilali*, 39. See also Orville T. Murphy, 'Louis XVI and the Pattern and Costs of a Policy Dilemma: Russia and the Eastern Question, 1787–1788', *Consortium on Revolutionary Europe 1750–1850: Proceedings* 16 (1986): 264–74.

[61] Gouffier to Montmorin, 19 Sept. 1787, AMAE CP Turquie 176. For the Franco-Ottoman relations at the time, see M. Le Comte de Saint-Priest, *Mémoires sur l'ambassade de France en Turquie* (Paris: Librairie de la Société Asiatique, 1877).

[62] Stanford J. Shaw, *Between Old and New: The Ottoman Empire under Sultan Selim III, 1789–1807* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 122; Firges, 'Gunners for the Sultan', 173.

[63] See Ch. 3 for more detail.

[64] Gran, *Islamic Roots*, 8.

[65] C. F. Volney, *Considérations sur la guerre actuelle des Turcs* (London (i.e. Paris), 1788), 9.

Two camps—one interventionist, the other conservationist—thus emerged in Paris with respect to how to tackle the alleged decadence of the Ottoman Empire. In the end, the death of Vergennes paved the way not only for his opponents, but also for the war that he had long worked to foil—the one between Empress Catherine II, who had taken advantage of the 1783 uprising in the Crimea and intervened to annex it, and Sultan Abdülhamid I, who had striven to prevent her intervention. For one last time in her history, Austria joined Russia against the Ottoman Sublime Porte. The French king Louis XVI then decided not to upset relations with his ally and brother-in-law, Joseph II. As Vergennes was no longer in the picture, France withdrew her military advisers from Istanbul.[66]

The dominance of the interventionists in Paris was short-lived: only two years later, the French Revolution of 1789 occurred and a new situation emerged after the revolutionaries gained power. New alliances formed in Europe, including one between Prussia and the Ottoman Empire (1790). Austria and Russia needed to reposition their armies at the eastern borders of republican France and in the soon-to-be-partitioned Poland. Only months before the outbreak of the War of the First Coalition in April 1792, peace treaties were concluded between Istanbul and Vienna in Sistova in August 1791 and then between St Petersburg and Istanbul in Iasi in January 1792.[67] But not before Austria and Russia ventured on one last, and successful, offensive that gave them the upper hand in the peace negotiations.

The Porte recognized the Russian annexation of the Crimea, which led many contemporary Russian strategists to believe that the tsar's empire had now reached convenient geographical boundaries that no longer entailed expansionism toward the south.[68] But, as we will see in Chapter 2, in Istanbul, losing the Crimea to Russia left the Ottoman rulers with an immense desire for revenge on Russia with the support of France. To this end, the Porte hoped to form an alliance with Paris and act together in the long run. But French diplomacy would turn in a very different direction by the end of the decade.

Preparation for the Egyptian Expedition

In fact, there was ample ground for the establishment of a solid Franco-Ottoman alliance in the early 1790s. One immediate effect of the French Revolution of 1789 on Franco-Ottoman relations was a new episode of rapprochement.[69] In the early

[66] Firges, 'Gunners for the Sultan', 174.

[67] Ibid. 172. See also Karl A. Roider, Jr, *Baron Thugut and Austria's Response to the French Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 262–92.

[68] Bitis, *Russia*, 21–2.

[69] Kemal Beydilli, 'III. Selim: Aydınlanmış Hükümdar', in *Nizam-ı Kadim'den Nizam-ı Cedid'e III. Selim ve Dönemi*, ed. Seyfi Kenan (Istanbul: İSAM Yayınları, 2010), 45–6.

1790s, and more specifically in 1793, a large number of French military instructors, technicians, architects, artillery experts, caulkers, and carpenters moved to Istanbul to help Sultan Selim III's reform programme that was under way in the Ottoman imperial capital.[70] Some of these specialists had been made redundant during the revolutionary fervour in France and were looking for jobs elsewhere. Others were deliberately sent by the new French regime to aid the sultan, help him build a new fleet, improve city fortresses, and train his 'New Order' army.[71]

With a letter dated 17 September 1795, the young Corsican Bonaparte also applied for a position in Istanbul to tutor the new Ottoman army—the very soldiers that his men would fight half a decade later. But his application was turned down, as the French government preferred to use his outstanding skills for the more immediate interests of the Republic.[72]

In the mid-1790s, Istanbul became a microcosm of European wars, where the diplomats of belligerent states in the ambassadorial district competed with each other to gain the favour of the sultan against their enemies. The French diplomats enjoyed greater sympathy and interest from the Ottoman cabinet in part due to Sultan Selim III's admiration for France and partly because the enemy of the Porte's enemy (Russia) was seen as a greater friend than others. For its part, the new republican regime in Paris looked to form closer diplomatic relations with Istanbul because France was diplomatically isolated in the world. Twenty of the 23 French foreign legations were terminated between early 1792 and late 1793, and her diplomatic representation was confined to the Ottoman Empire, Switzerland and the United States.[73]

This was why, the Republic's first mission to the Porte had in view the establishment of both defensive and offensive alliances with Sultan Selim III.[74] Due to the persistence of the Austro-Russian threat, which the sultan hoped to thwart with the support of friendly Powers like France, a powerful ally could well serve the security of the Ottoman Empire also. But at the same time, having just signed peace treaties with Austria and Russia, the sultan was reluctant to be drawn into European wars. In 1795, therefore, the Ottoman Empire declared neutrality for the first time in her history, continuing the passive, non-belligerent policy that she had employed for decades but this time looking to guarantee it by international public law.

Selim III re-evaluated his policy in May 1796 when Austria and Russia signed a new alliance treaty earlier in the same year.[75] France had come up with new, highly

[70] See Ch. 2. [71] Firges, 'Gunners', 176. [72] Soysal, *Fransız İhtilali*, 162.
[73] Firges, *French Revolutionaries*, 1, 20. [74] Firges, 'Gunners', 174.
[75] Soysal, *Fransız İhtilali*, 127, 132; E. de Marcère, *Une ambassade à Constantinople. La Politique orientale de la Révolution française II* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1927); Fatih Yeşil, 'III. Selim Döneminde Bir Osmanlı Bürokratı: Ebubekir Ratib Efendi' (master's thesis, Hacettepe University, Ankara, 2002), 212–13; cf. Kahraman Şakul, 'An Ottoman Global Moment: War of Second Coalition in the Levant', (doctoral thesis, Georgetown University, 2009), 58.

favourable terms for the sultan's empire. It would be a purely defensive alliance. The Porte would not be liable to intervene in the war between France and Britain, while 'in case of an attack on Ottoman territory, France would either send an army of 30,000 men, or eight ships of the line and twelve frigates, or a corresponding amount of subsidies.'[76] In return, France would be granted further commercial advantages, including trade in the Black Sea, that would upend the privileged standing of the Russian merchants.[77]

However, when, in Paris, the Directory regime took power, it decided not to ratify the treaty on the grounds that war with Russia would be too costly while France would receive no support in the fight against Britain. The drift between the courts of Paris and Istanbul began at this point. The new foreign minister, Charles-François Delacroix (1795–7) found 'neither equality nor reciprocity' in such a treaty, just as France had proved her military strength and turned into an expansionist power in Europe.[78]

The successive victories France obtained against the first Coalition in this period had led to an adjustment of her policies toward the Porte. After the signing of the Peace of Campo Formio in October 1797, France turned the Low Countries, a large portion of northern Italy, and the Adriatic outpost of Corfu into client states. In the following months, she overran the Papal States, Switzerland and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies in quick succession. And thanks to the alliance with Spain, the Directory had, with the exception of Portugal, managed to isolate Britain. In early 1798, the French leadership came to a crossroads: should they make use of Britain's isolation, adopt a strictly continental policy and acquire further gains in Europe? Or should they pursue a colonial policy with an overseas expedition?

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Pivotal in the resolution of this question was the return of Charles Talleyrand from exile in England and America in late 1796, and his appointment as the new foreign minister in July 1797.[79] Even though all members of the Directory ruled out the 'colonial policy' because the French navy was too weak to cope with a potential British naval offensive, the new foreign minister considered overseas expansion the solution to domestic disorder. As the former bishop of Autun, Talleyrand was himself a product of the ancien régime. He favoured order, restraint, and balance in Europe, and to this end envisaged an Anglo-French entente that would seal peace and security in Europe.

[76] Firges, 'Gunners for the Sultan', 179.
[77] Marcère, *Une ambassade*, 263.
[78] Firges, 'Gunners', 179–80. See also Bailey Stone, *Reinterpreting the French Revolution: A Global-Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 219–20, 232.
[79] Philip G. Dwyer, *Talleyrand* (Harlow: Longman, 2002), 60–61.

Any excessive expansion in the continent beyond the natural limits of France, he believed, would endanger the European equipoise. He also argued that the colonies were 'the only real and permanent sources of power', and that, with 'mutual territorial and colonial concessions', a compromise could be obtained with Britain. He wanted moderation and peace, and credulously maintained that both Britain and the Sublime Porte could be persuaded to approve France's next démarche: the invasion of Egypt.

Inspired by the ideas of the interventionist duc de Choiseul, who had previously suggested the cession of Egypt to France by the Porte, Talleyrand pointed out in a widely popularized speech in July 1797 (later published under the title *Essai sur les avantages à retirer de colonies nouvelles dans les circonstances présentes*) that Egypt was a most suitable country for such colonial expansion.[80] Since 1793, the political isolation of France had led to her exclusion from world trade. The south of France was dependent on Egyptian wheat, but, due to a domestic recession, the French merchants were unable to pay the costs of trade. In the mid-1790s, as the Mamluk beys Murad and Ibrahim returned to Cairo and controlled the customs of the country, and when they pillaged the supplies of the indebted French merchants' supplies, pressuring them out of the wheat trade, an active lobbying campaign had begun once again for the French invasion of Egypt.[81]

The campaign was led by prominent merchant Charles Magellon, who returned to Paris in 1795, and addressed to Talleyrand a memorandum (*Mémoire sur l'Égypte*) in which he detailed the agricultural opportunities for France in Egypt.[82] At first, M. Dubois-Thainville was sent to Egypt to settle differences with Mamluk Murad and Ibrahim Beys, but the mission yielded no results. The French merchants' alert that the British were negotiating trade and transit privileges with the Mamluks against French interests raised eyebrows in the Directory.[83] The lobby of merchants and diplomats confirmed that an expedition to Egypt was now a matter of ever greater necessity.[84]

At the same time, since late summer 1797, after his success in Italy, General Bonaparte had been indulging in dreams of expanding his victories in the 'Orient'. He then began an eager correspondence with Talleyrand. Influenced since his youth by the rich interventionist literature in favour of the occupation of Egypt, Bonaparte too was persuaded that the dissolution of the sultan's empire was

[80] Charles Maurice de Talleyrand, *Essai sur les avantages à retirer de colonies nouvelles dans les circonstances présentes* (Paris: chez Baudoin, Imprimeur de l'Institut National, 1797), 14.

[81] See Ch. 3.

[82] Gran, *Islamic Roots*, 10. See also Isa Blumi, *Foundations of Modernity: Human Agency and the Imperial State* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 22–4.

[83] David Kimche, 'The Opening of the Red Sea to British Ships in the Late Eighteenth Century', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 7(1) (Jan. 1972): 63–71; Silvera, 'Egypt and the French Revolution', 309.

[84] Gran, *Islamic Roots*, 10.

near.[85] In August–September 1797, when he spoke of the plan to invade Egypt for the first time, he appeared to view the expedition as part of the greater idea that was the partition of the 'declining' Ottoman Empire.[86]

After the French annexation of the Ionian Islands, he believed that France had to play a more proactive role in the Ottoman world. He made contacts with dissenting Ottoman paşas (such as Ali Paşa of Janina) for potential future collaboration.[87] The situation of that vast empire, he asserted, 'puts us under the obligation of thinking early to take steps to preserve our commerce in the Levant'.[88]

What withheld France from acting straightaway was the fact that Louis Marie de La Révellière-Lépeaux (1753–1824), the powerful leader of the Directory regime in Paris, was still unconvinced. He was in favour of a direct attack on their immediate enemies (Britain), finding it difficult to fathom why France should weaken her armies, risk the disappearance of her last vessels, and break off relations with the Porte.[89]

It remained for Talleyrand, therefore, to persuade the Directory to defer the planned attack on Britain and focus instead on an expedition to Egypt. In an unsolicited report sent in January 1798, the French foreign minister argued that their armies would be warmly received in Egypt for emancipating the local inhabitants from the yoke of the Mamluks. And the Porte would be convinced with a special mission that would show French dexterity in solving the Mamluk problem. In another report in February, Talleyrand wrote that the French occupation of Ottoman Egypt could be justified in relation to the partitions of Poland, which had been endorsed by Britain and the other European Powers.[90] Years later he added with hindsight in his memoirs that France was seeking compensation then, even if it was at the Porte's expense. She was seeking only to redress the European balance.[91]

As their correspondence in late 1797 and early 1798 suggests, Talleyrand and Bonaparte saw multiple benefits in the expedition plan. By capturing Egypt, the Republic would control the shortest transportation and communication routes between the British mainland and India. They would cut the 'jugular vein' of the British Empire. The invasion would enhance the commercial relations between France and the Levant, which had become more significant for the Republic. The

[85] Bonaparte reportedly read Volney's travelogues in the Levant. C. F. de Volney, *Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie pendany les annees 17783, 174 & 1785* (Paris: Voland, 1787); Bainville, 'L'Expédition française', 136; Thomas Kaiser, 'The Evil Empire? The Debate on Turkish Despotism in Eighteenth-Century French Political Culture', *Journal of Modern History* 72(1) (2000): 18–22; Christopher Herold, *Bonaparte in Egypt* (New York: Pen & Sword Books, 1962), 16.

[86] Philipp G. Dwyer, *Napoleon: The Path to Power, 1769–1799* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 338; Bonaparte to Talleyrand, 16 Aug. and 13 Sept. 1797, in Charles-Roux, *Les Origines*, 297, 298, 300.

[87] Mikaberidze, *Napoleonic Wars*, 73. [88] Ibid.

[89] Michel Poniatowski, *Talleyrand et le Directoire* (Paris: Librairie académique Perrin, 1982), 446.

[90] Bonaparte to Talleyrand, 16 Aug. and 13 Sept. 1797, in Charles-Roux, *Les Origines*, 300.

[91] Duc de Broglie (ed.), *Mémoires du prince de Talleyrand*, vol 1. (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1891), 259.

occupation of Italy, Albania, and the Ionian Islands in 1797 had made it a neighbour of the Ottoman Empire. Invading Egypt would enable the dismissal of the Mamluk beys, who, the Directory thought, were hampering French trade and risking domestic stability, as the south of France was in the brink of starvation due to poor harvests, and the Republic was isolated from world trade. Moreover, Talleyrand and Bonaparte wrote to each other that the invasion would permit the internal development of Egypt, since the toiling yet docile *fellahin* (Egyptian peasants) would finally be freed from the Mamluk yoke. France would bring 'civilization' and prosperity, they believed.[92] In return, she would gain a new key colony, with resources that could replace St Dominique and the Antilles in the rivalry with Britain.[93]

Perhaps most importantly, the occupation of Egypt would be the centrepiece for the realization of a dream shared by Talleyrand and Bonaparte: the transformation of the Mediterranean into a French lake through satellite republics as a colonial zone as well as a buffer against the British navy.[94] The overarching idea of the expedition plan was to wither away the threats posed by Britain to the global imperial interests of France.[95] In Bonaparte's view 'a descent upon Egypt' was the only means for attaining French dominance over the Mediterranean.[96] To Talleyrand, '[o]nce the French controlled the ports of Italy, Corfu, Malta and Alexandria', their objective would be obtained.[97] This would endow France not only with greater leverage in the competition against Britain. With a foothold in the Ionian Islands and North Africa, it would also give her a firmer grip on the future of the Ottoman Empire. Paris would be able to open 'a route to India via the Red Sea, and [recover] Pondicherry and other French possessions on the Corromandel and Malabar coasts'.[98] Egypt, as a colony, would replace the products of the West Indies and, as a route, give France the commerce of India—'for everything in commerce resides in time, and time would give us five trips against three by the ordinary road'.[99]

Like Vergennes, Talleyrand believed that the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire was near. Again, like Vergennes, he was against any radical move that would break apart European balance for the spoils of the 'Turkish empire'. But, unlike Vergennes, he called for moderation in aggression, seeking the middle way between the realist ideas of the interventionists, who focused on the strategic and

[92] Charles-Roux, *Les Origines*, 327–8.

[93] Ibid. 2, 303. See also Gaultier-Kurhan, *Méhémet Ali*, 19; *Mémoires du maréchal Marmont, duc de Raguse de 1792 à 1841*, vol. 1 (Paris: Halle, 1857), 350; M. le Cte Boulay de la Meurthe, *La Directoire et l'expédition d'Égypte* (Paris: Victor Palme, 1880), 12–13.

[94] Talleyrand, *Essai*, 14.

[95] Paul W. Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763–1848* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 179.

[96] Silvera, 'Egypt', 310.

[97] Marcère, *Une ambassade*, 357.

[98] Cole, *Napoleon's Egypt*, 14.

[99] Talleyrand to Bonaparte, 23 Sept. 1797; cf. Charles-Roux, *Les Origines*, 304.

economic benefits, and the postulations of the opponents of the expedition—previously Vergennes and his entourage and now the Directory, however different their reckonings were. He himself could see the risks of a war with the Porte and the participation of other powers in this war in the event that the expedition went through. This was why, as he wrote to Bonaparte in September 1797 after reading the latter's ambitions in the East, he presented the expedition as one 'for the [Sublime] Porte', and against what he believed to be the chronic Russian and British intrigues in this 'unfortunate country'. It would be '*[u]n si grand service* rendu aux Turcs'.[100]

Talleyrand saw great benefits for Selim III and the indigenous *fellahin* in the French occupation of Egypt, and persuaded himself that the sultan knew about British and Russian intrigues, that the Mamluks were a menace to his own rule as much as to the French trade, and that Selim would appreciate such a pre-emptive assault by a friendly and strong ally 'to keep the province from falling into enemy hands'.[101] He framed the plan as a gift from France to Selim. He even suggested going to Istanbul himself to talk to the sultan and explain to him the reasons of the expedition when it was already under way.

In the end, Talleyrand's moderate aggressionism received endorsement, and on 5 March 1798, when the Directory regime confirmed the expedition plan, Bonaparte was instructed to 'maintain, as much as it is in his powers to maintain good understanding with the [sultan]'.[102] As Cole correctly puts it, Talleyrand became the first, 'but by no means the last, Western politician to overestimate the gratitude that would be generated among a Middle Eastern people by a foreign military occupation'.[103] As a matter of fact, the French plan was not received with appreciation in Istanbul at all. When the news of the expedition broke in the Ottoman imperial capital, Sultan Selim III burst into anger in the Topkapı Palace.

[100] Ibid. 303. Emphasis mine. [101] Ibid.

[102] *Instructions pour Bonaparte*, 12 Apr. 1798, in Albert Sorel, *L'Europe et la révolution français*, vol. 5 (Paris: Plon-Nourrit, 1904), 301; also in Firges, *French Revolutionaries*, 90.

[103] Cole, *Napoleon's Egypt*, 14.