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Banner With the Lion of St. Mark (banner) Italy, Venice, 1675.  
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# The Long Route to Egypt From Saint Louis to Bonaparte

BY EMANUELE FARRUGGIA

**ABSTRACT.** Saint Louis' failed crusade to Egypt has epitomized for centuries the high risks of conquering Egypt. Leibniz's suggestion to the Sun King to conquer Egypt went unheeded. The key strategic value of Egypt for French interests re-emerged in the course of the XVIII Century in several policy papers ignored by French diplomacy, which kept to the alliance with the Ottoman Empire. Only after the Revolution, the business interests of a merchant, the new colonial policy of a Foreign Minister and the ambition of a young General combined into launching the Egyptian expedition.

**KEYWORDS:** UNHOLY ALLIANCE, DIPLOMACY, ENVOY, LEVANT, EGYPT, RED SEA, INDIA, SUBLIME PORTE, CAPITULATIONS, CANAL, ROUTE, TRADE, TREATY, EXPEDITION, PLAN, STRATEGY.

## *Introduction*

**T**he utter failure of the seventh crusade of Louis IX, in 1248-54<sup>1</sup>, has epitomized for centuries the high risks of conquering Egypt. When Leibniz, in 1672, urged Louis XIV to occupy Egypt<sup>2</sup>, French Foreign Secretary Arnauld de Pomponne the answered that the crusades had been out of fashion since the times of Saint Louis<sup>3</sup>. French policy towards Egypt since the XVI Century has been in tune with the "Treaty of the Capitulations" between Francis I and Suleiman the Magnificent of 1536. The treaty was not only a commercial one but also an *alliance de revers* against the House of Habsburg. At the beginning of his

1 Jonathan RILEY-SMITH, *The Crusades, a short history*, Yale University Press, Yale, 2005

2 Emanuele FARRUGGIA, Leibniz's Last Crusade: the Philosopher as a Strategist. Leibniz's Consilium Aegyptiacum and its afterlife, *Nuova Antologia Militare*, Anno 4, Fascicolo 16, Roma, 2023, online

3 Paul SONNINO, *Louis XIV and the Origins of the Dutch War*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003.

reign, Louis XIV had deviated from the traditional Franco-Ottoman Alliance, in particular by sending troops in support of the Venetian defence of Candia and of the Habsburg during the brief Austro-Turkish war of 1663-64.<sup>4</sup> Soon afterwards, the powerful Navy Minister and Comptroller General, Jean Baptiste Colbert had reverted to the traditional alliance with the Sublime Porte, gaining the primacy of France as an economic partner. The French Envoys to Constantinople, however, did not achieve one of Colbert's goals: the reopening of the ancient trade route between the Mediterranean Sea and India through the Red Sea

Looking forward to re-assert French international standing after the Seven Years War, Foreign Secretary Étienne François Choiseul Duke de Choiseul-Beaupré-Stainville, highlighted the key value of Egypt as a gate to India and the Eastern Seas. His successor, Charles Gravier Count de Vergennes, however, was more cautious. Vergennes, while recognizing the importance of India to France, wanted to preserve the traditional alliance with the Ottoman Empire.

A new plan for the conquest of Egypt was the outcome of the secret mission to the Levant carried out by Baron François de Tott on behalf of Secretary of State for the Navy, Count de Sartine. Tott's detailed report (1779) might have been the blueprint for the expedition of Bonaparte, who availed himself of the services of the same interpreter, Jean-Michel Venture de Paradis, who had accompanied Tott,

Due to Vergennes' opposition to the destabilization of the Ottoman Empire, despite the open encouragement of the Holy Roman Emperor, Joseph II, the Egyptian projects never materialized until the end of the *Ancien Régime*.

During the War of American Independence, Admiral Suffren's naval campaigns in the Indian Ocean could not restore French position in the Indian sub-continent. However, they kept the door open to the return of France to the Bay of Bengal.

In 1797, the new Foreign Minister, Charles Maurice de Talleyrand Périgord, followed in the footsteps of Choiseul and envisaged an expedition to Egypt in order to establish a French colony there and threaten British rule in India.

Talleyrand found an enthusiastic supporter in young and ambitious General Napoleon Bonaparte, who, after defeating Austria in Italy, had assumed the

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<sup>4</sup> Gregory HANLON, *European Military Rivalry, 1500–1750: Fierce Pageant*, Routledge, Oxford, 2020.



impossible task of carrying the war to Britain itself. Bonaparte's expedition to Egypt ended in strategic failure and resulted in undisputed British naval hegemony in the Mediterranean.

Tipu Sultan, the pro-French ruler of Mysore, without any prospect of French support, succumbed to the East India Company offensive under the political-military leadership of the Wellesley brothers.

### *1 The Unholy Alliance: France and the Ottoman Empire.*

The general framework of the relations between the Kingdom of France and the Ottoman Empire was established by the "Treaty of the Capitulations", concluded between Francis I and Suleiman the Magnificent in 1536, by which France obtained rights and privileges for its subjects resident or trading with the Ottoman Empire. King Louis XII and the Mameluke Sultan of Egypt had already reached a similar arrangement in 1500, which was included in the Capitulations Treaty. The informal anti-Habsburg military alliance – the Unholy (or Impious) Alliance – had already been in force since 1528.<sup>5</sup>

The Capitulations Treaty, negotiated by the first French Envoy to the Sublime Porte, Jean de la Forêt, later complemented by a *firman* granting France the right of custody over the Holy Places, remained the cornerstone of French relations with the Ottoman Empire for more than two centuries.

The Treaty was mutually advantageous. It provided France with an *alliance de revers* against the Habsburg King of Spain and the Habsburg Holy Roman Emperor and granted a privileged position to French traders in the Levant. From the Ottoman perspective, it relieved the pressure from Spain in the Mediterranean and imposed a perpetual two front war on the Habsburgs of Austria.

Richelieu and Mazarin called the traditional alliance with the Ottomans into question, although only in theory. Deviating from the traditional Franco-Ottoman alliance, in 1663 Louis XIV sent troops in support of the Holy Roman Emperor and of Venice in 1669 (see above), incurring in the hostility of the powerful Grand Vizier, Köprülü Fazıl Ahmet. The Sun King even had to excuse and justify the French participation in the Imperial Army as one imposed by his status as

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<sup>5</sup> Edith GARNIER, *L'Alliance Impie, François Ier et Soliman le Magnifique contre Charles Quint (1529-1547)*, Éditions du Felin, Paris, 2008

«Prince of the Empire».

In 1672, at the outbreak of the Dutch War, the Foreign Secretary discarded the proposal addressed by Leibnitz for an expedition to Egypt. After the renewal of the Capitulations Treaty, in 1673, Louis XIV reverted to the traditional policy of friendship with the Ottoman Empire, refusing to join the Holy League and attacking, in 1688, the Emperor, thus relieving pressure on the Ottoman Army in Hungary

Thereafter, the powerful Minister of the Navy and Controller General of Finance, Jean Baptiste Colbert, who preferred to achieve the goals of his mercantilist policy through diplomacy rather than military power as advocated by Leibniz in his paper, dictated French policy in the Mediterranean and the Levant.<sup>6</sup>

A key objective of Colbert's policy was the re-opening of the ancient trade route between the Mediterranean and India through the Red Sea, which had lost its value after the Portuguese geographic discoveries and the opening of the sea route through the Cape of Good Hope.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, ever since the conquest of Egypt and Arabia in 1517, the Ottomans had not allowed Christian ships to sail beyond Mokha to keep them afar from the holy places of Mecca and Medina.<sup>8</sup>

While negotiating the renewal of the Capitulations Treaty, Colbert tried to gain from the Ottomans the opening of a land route from Alexandria to Suez for French merchants, in order to<sup>9</sup> get access to trade with India.

Three Envoys, de la Haye-Vantelet in 1665, de Nointel from 1670 to 1673 - and de Girardin after long and difficult negotiations, did not succeed in getting that access, which remained a constant goal of French diplomacy.

Whereas de la Haye and Nointel simply asked for the opening of the land and river route from Suez to Alexandria, de Girardin hinted at the re-establishment of

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6 Alfred T MAHAN, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History 1660-1783*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1890.

7 François CHARLES-ROUX, *Les Origines de l'Expédition d'Égypte*, Plon-Nourrit et Cie, Imprimeurs-Éditeurs, Paris, 1910

8 David KIMCHE, 'The Opening of the Red Sea to European Ships in the Late Eighteenth Century', *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.8., No.1 (Jan, 1972), Taylor and Francis, Oxford, 1972

9 Albert VANDAL, *Louis XIV et l'Égypte*, Alphonse Picard Editeur, Paris, 1889



the ancient canal from the Nile to the Red Sea (the Pharaohs' Canal) as well as at the excavation of a new canal between the Red Sea and the Mediterranean.

In 1679, a French trader and economist, *avant lettre*, Jacques Savary, published the second edition of his book, *Le Parfait Negociant*<sup>10</sup>, where he advocated the excavation of a canal between the Red Sea and the Mediterranean. The French Consul to Cairo, Benoit de Maillet, put forward the same suggestion, in 1697.

In the first half of the XVIII Century, French policy in the Levant continued in the footsteps of Colbert. Cultivating friendship with the Sublime Porte, it preserved its privileged position in the «*Échelles du Levant*», the commercial bases of Constantinople, Smyrna, Aleppo, Sidon, Tripolis, Alexandria, Rosetta, Cairo, Candia, Morea, the Aegean, where French residents settled under the protection of consuls. The consuls reported to the Ministry of the Navy, responsible for the «*Échelles du Levant*», but in fact promoted the interests of the Chamber of Commerce of Marseille, the chief beneficiary of trade with the Levant.

France's position in those years was still paramount in the Ottoman Empire. Paris was the best friend of the Sublime Porte that benefited from French diplomatic support in the negotiations of the Treaty of Belgrade (1739) with Austria. France also continued to provide military assistance through the unofficial missions of adventurers like Claude Alexandre Count de Bonneval (Humbaraci Ahmet Pasha)<sup>11</sup>. Whilst the trade of France with the Levant contracted in volumes, it remained profitable for the city of Marseille.

Eventually, the authority of the Ottoman government in Egypt declined and an oligarchy of Mameluke Beys, who became the interlocutors of the French Consuls, took the power.

At the same time, the growing anarchy in the country made life for French residents quite difficult. Due to their ineffective commercial policies the Ottoman were not able to export to Europe the highly coveted coffee from Moka and Jedda through Egypt but only to ship the goods by taking the longer route of the Cape of Good Hope. Therefore, the French Envoy to Constantinople, Louis Saveur de Villeneuve concluded in 1737 a separate commercial Treaty with the Sheriff of

10 Jacques SAVARY, *Le Parfait Négociant*, 2ème édition, Paris, 1679

11 Albert VANDAL, *Le Pacha Bonneval*, Au cercle Saint-Simon, Paris, 1885.

Mecca. In 1740, Villeneuve renewed the Capitulations Treaty on most favourable terms, reaching the highest point in trade relations between Paris and Constantinople.

## 2 *From Choiseul to Vergennes.*<sup>12</sup>

A defining moment of French policy in the Ottoman Empire occurred in 1768<sup>13</sup>, at the outbreak of the Russo-Turkish war. The war, actually instigated by France, resulted in outright defeat of the Ottoman forces, in spite of French military assistance and diplomatic support.<sup>14</sup>

The French Foreign Secretary, Étienne François Choiseul, Duke de Choiseul, had repeatedly instructed his Envoy to Constantinople, Charles Gravier, Count de Vergennes, to encourage the Ottoman Government to declare war on Russia also to relieve the Russian pressure on Poland, another historical ally of France.

Ottoman forces benefited from the advice and mentorship of a clever and experienced French officer of Hungarian origin, Baron François de Tott,<sup>15</sup> who had assisted the Khan of the Crimean Tatars against the Russians in 1767-68. He subsequently returned to Constantinople and organized the defence of the Dardanelles against the Russian fleet of Admiral Aleksey Grigorevich Orlov. Tott, moreover, established a school of artillery and a gun foundry.<sup>16</sup>

In 1768, François-Emmanuel Guignard, Comte de Saint-Priest, replaced Vergennes. Choiseul instructed Saint Priest to keep supporting the Ottomans but at the same time, to consider the possibility of a breakup of the Empire. There is no written evidence that Choiseul had envisaged the conquest of Egypt as he had successfully acquired Corsica from the Genoese Republic. According to some of his followers, such as the Duke de Lauzun, Choiseul contemplated taking over

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12 Jeremy BLACK, *From Louis XIV to Napoleon: The Fate of a Great Power*, Routledge, Milton Park, Abingdon-on-Thames, Oxfordshire, 1999.

13 François CHARLES-ROUX, *Le projet Français de conquête de l'Égypte sous le règne de Louis XVI*, Imprimerie de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, Cairo, 1929.

14 Henry LAURENS, *Les Crises d'Orient, 1768-1914*, Fayard, Paris, 2017.

15 Ferenc TOTTH, Un penseur géostratégique avant la lettre : le baron de Tott, *Nuova Antologia Militare*, Anno 3, Fascicolo 11, Roma, 2022, online

16 François de TOTTH, *Mémoires du Baron de Tott sur les Turcs et les tartares*, quatrième partie, Amsterdam, 1784.

Egypt in case of a not-too-distant partition of the Ottoman Empire.

In the same year (1768), the Consul at Aleppo, Pedro de Perdrian, submitted to the Secretary of the Navy, César Gabriel de Choiseul, Duke de Praslin, a memorandum, *Mémoire sur le commerce que la nation française peut entreprendre dans le golfe Persique, Bassora, Bagdad et échelles du Levant*. Perdrian, in agreement with the Marseille Chamber of Commerce, envisaged opening a trade route from India to Marseille through the Persian Gulf port of Bassora. The trade route should pass through Baghdad and Aleppo and, from there, to the Mediterranean Coast.<sup>17</sup> Even this project was put aside.

Acting under the instructions of his Minister and with the active involvement of Tott, Saint Priest continued to support the Ottoman Government in resisting the Russians.

In 1770, at the death of Madame de Pompadour, Choiseul fell into disgrace with Madame du Barry and was relieved from his Ministry retiring to his castle of Chanteloup. His successors, Foreign Secretaries Louis Phélypeaux de Saint Florentin, Duke of La Vrillère and Emmanuel-Armand de Vignérot du Plessis-Richelieu, Duke d'Aguillon, continued to support the Ottomans in their war against Russia, which ended in 1774 with a humiliating defeat, sanctioned by the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainardji.

Although France still enjoyed a privileged position in Egypt, the British tried, in the same years, to achieve the same goal of French diplomacy: to revive the ancient trade route between Europe and India through Egypt. The targets of the British demarches were the Mameluke *de facto* rulers of Egypt. Ali Bey conceded access to Suez to British merchant ships already in April 1773.

However, it was on March 7<sup>th</sup>, 1775, that Warren Hastings, the British Governor-General of Bengal, concluded a treaty with Ali Bey's successor, Mohammed Abu Dahab, by which British ships obtained absolute freedom of navigation between India and Suez along with guarantees of safety for caravans transporting goods between Suez and Cairo. The treaty included the reduction of duties on goods coming from Calcutta, Madras, Bombay and Surat. An armed attack by the Bedouins on a British caravan in 1779 and the opposition of the Ottoman Govern-

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<sup>17</sup> François CHARLES-ROUX, 'La Politique Française en Egypte', *Revue-Historique*, May-August, Paris, 1906.

ment put a temporary end to British efforts to channel Indian trade through Suez.

In 1774, the new King, Louis XVI, appointed Vergennes as Foreign Secretary. The former Envoy to Constantinople just wanted to preserve the Ottoman Empire without taking into consideration a possible partition. From that time on and until the end of the American Independence War, Vergennes focused his diplomatic efforts on taking revenge against Britain for the defeat suffered during the Seven Years War. Therefore, he preferred to avoid conflicting engagements in Europe or in the Mediterranean.

During the conflict with Russia Saint Priest had noticed the extreme disorganization of the Ottoman armed forces and forecasted the implosion of the Ottoman Empire. In 1777, Saint Priest while he was on leave in France submitted to Vergennes a report, where he suggested that, in case efforts to save the Ottoman Empire with the support of Austria and Spain failed, France should be ready to conquer Egypt. Vergennes once again rejected the advice and instructed Saint Priest to exert restraint on the Ottoman government to avoid a new war with Russia.

Accordingly, Saint Priest mediated between the Ottoman and the Russians favouring the conclusion of the Convention of Aynali Kavak (1779). During his leave, Saint Priest had also met with the Holy Roman Emperor, Joseph II, who was openly encouraging his brother-in-law, Louis XVI, to join in the partition of the Ottoman Empire by occupying Egypt.

In the meantime, the Navy Secretariat, responsible for the «*Échelles du Levant*», was carefully watching events in the Ottoman Empire and in Egypt in particular. In May 1774, Jean-Charles-Nicolas Amé de Saint Didier, Premier Commis, submitted to the Secretary of the Navy, Pierre Étienne Bourgeois, Marquess de Boynes, a short but well drafted memo. In his paper, Saint Didier argued for taking over Egypt as the only means to preserve the gains from trade with the Levant, currently under Russian and British threat.

The memo was the kind of brief but focused policy paper that gets the attention of a busy Minister.

After the change of government, Antoine Raymond Jean-Gualbert Gabriel de Sartine took the place of Boynes but continued to avail himself of the valuable advice of Saint Didier.

### 3 *De Tott's plan.*

Coming back to France after the conclusion of the Turkish-Russian War in 1776, Tott submitted to Vergennes and Sartine a memorandum, *Examen de l'état physique et de la politique de l'Empire Ottoman et des vues qu'il determine relativement à la France*, whose contents had been previously agreed with Saint Priest. Forecasting the imminent downfall of the Ottoman Empire, Tott presented two policy options: either to try to save the Empire from implosion through complete reorganization of the State and the Army or to profit from its dismemberment by taking over Egypt.

The possession of Egypt would preserve French commercial interests and, at same time, deal a blow to British trade. Vergennes discarded the project, as he rejected, again, any prospect of partition of the Ottoman Empire.

At the Navy Secretariat, where the Premier Commis had planted the seed, Tott's report raised the interest of Sartine. The Minister requested Saint Didier to comment on Tott's paper, which he did in the memo: *Observations sur l'Égypte*. This time the paper was long and comprehensive. After a political preamble where he recapped the situation of the Ottoman Empire after the disastrous war with Russia, the risks of Russian hegemony and the likely fall of the Empire, Saint Didier outlined in six chapters a country report on Egypt.

He went into detail about its geographical features, its population, its recent history, the political situation, and its economy. He put the relevant questions in the final three chapters: *Examen des avantages qu'on retiendrait de la conquête de l'Égypte, Cette conquête est-elle possible?, La conquête de l'Égypte est-elle ou deviendra-t-elle nécessaire ?*

The moment looked favourable for the endeavour, as Catherine II was eager to restore the Eastern Roman Empire and Britain was fighting the American rebels. Spain's naval and military support was also expected. The conquest of Egypt would have prevented the British from seizing Egypt.

Saint Didier concluded his memorandum with the very practical suggestion to dispatch Tott as Inspector General of the *Échelles du Levant et de Barbarie* to the region on behalf of the Naval Secretariat. The appointment was a cover for his real task: a thorough reconnaissance of Egypt's coasts, cities, and military defences. Tott should have drafted a plan to conquer, rule and retain Egypt, detailing the forces and means needed for the task. Sartine fully agreed with Saint Didier's

proposal and appointed Tott Inspector General.

Being aware of Vergennes's strong opposition to the demise of the Ottoman Empire, Sartine gave Tott clear and straightforward verbal instructions on the real goal of his mission while shrouding the written ones in ambiguity and secrecy. Saint Didier's brother, a Navy officer, Ensign Amé de La Laune, should have accompanied and assisted him in his secret survey.

In order to cover Tott's real purpose a real naturalist, Charles-Nicolas-Sigisbert Sonnini de Mannoncourt, joined the expedition. Tott also assumed the fictitious task of performing astronomical observations on behalf of the Académie des Sciences. The interpreter was Jean-Michel Venture de Paradis who would later escort Bonaparte in his expedition to Egypt.

Before his departure from Toulon, Tott took the precaution of spreading false rumours about renewed French interest for the Black Sea trade.

The secret mission to the Red Sea of the Chevalier François Emmanuel Demaies de Montigny, also tasked by Sartine, had preceded Tott's mission in the Mediterranean.

Montigny had sailed on a mission to the court of the Mughal emperor in India in the fall of 1776. Traveling through Egypt, he reported to the Navy Secretariat on the lines of communication between Cairo and Suez, on its port facilities, inhabitants, coastal defences, the Red Sea, its ports, distance between Suez and Bab-el Mandeb and all other relevant information on navigation. The mission had a very specific target, the island of Perim, looking forward to its occupation. In his instructions, Sartine stressed the key value of Perim to control the sea route from Suez to India.

In his reports from Egypt in the spring of 1777, Montigny noticed the number of British merchant ships from India in the port of Suez and the need to prevent a possible British conquest of Egypt. The possession of Egypt, connected by sea to the Mediterranean naval bases of Gibraltar and Port Mahon (Minorca) would have forever secured British rule in India.

In July 1777, after a reconnaissance of the island of Crete, where they surveyed the forts of Suda Bay, Tott and La Laune disembarked in Alexandria from the frigate *L'Atalante*.

There, they received from the French Consul a confidential letter of Saint



Didier with an attached questionnaire. The list of 30 questions aimed at gathering information on Lower Egypt. In particular data were requested on: the towns of Alexandria, Rosette and Damiette; fortresses, communications, soil, topography, Nile navigation, the port of Suez; the extent of support that could be expected from the local Jewish community; the possibility to buy horses; the size and deployment of Turkish infantry and cavalry units.

The strategic goal was quite clear: by conquering Egypt, France would take control of the trade route to India and the House of Bourbon (including the Spanish branch) would be master of the Mediterranean Sea through the occupation of Gibraltar and Port Mahon.

At the same time, France would be able to contain Russia and Britain as well as Austrian ambitions in Italy. Saint Didier instructions also mentioned the conquest of Perim and the construction of a well-defended canal for navigation between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, whose southern terminal should have been the port of Suez.

During his stay in Egypt Tott accomplished his official tasks, meeting the Consuls and liquidating the debts of the Échelles, thus providing a justification for his mission. He also transferred the seat of the Consulate General from Cairo to Alexandria. He made an extensive reconnaissance of the Alexandria littoral and went with La Laune to Suez for the same purpose. La Laune conveyed to Saint Didier a report on his mission, *Observations de M.de La Laune sur son voyage à Suez*. At Suez, Tott bought from a British merchant an accurate map of the Red Sea as well as a plan of the city.

After Egypt, Tott and La Laune sailed for Syria and then Smyrna to visit the other Echelles. Before returning to France Tott conveyed, in December, a first sketch – drafted by La Laune - of naval operations needed to establish a bridgehead on the Egyptian littoral. After 15 months of travels in the Mediterranean, in 1779, Tott submitted his final, 118 pages long report, *Compte Rendu de la Mission secrète du baron de Tott*, to the King's Council.

After a short chapter dedicated to Crete, Tott, consistent with the logic of Saint Didier's *Observations sur l'Égypte*, stressed the economic and geopolitical advantages of Egypt's possession even proposing to exchange its acquisition with the remaining, indefensible American colonies.

The report included a detailed *Plan d'opérations pour la conquête de l'Égypte*.

According to the plan, an expeditionary corps of 17,000 soldiers, supported from the sea by a naval squadron of five ships of the line, seven frigates and other units, using the island of Crete as a stepping-stone, should have landed on the Egyptian coast, taking Alexandria, Abukir and Damiette.

From the Delta region, the corps should have marched on Cairo to defeat the Mameluke Beys. Tott's plan did not consider either the reaction of Turkey or that of the British navy. The plan underestimated the Mamelukes' will of resistance and was quite optimistic about the easy submission of the Arab population to the French King.<sup>18</sup> The First Minister of the King, Jean-Frédéric Phélyppeaux, Count of Maurepas, Sartine and Vergennes examined the report but they did not consider its implementation due to the well-known objections of Vergennes.

The report, together with Saint Didier memos and Saint Priest letters, however, ended up in the archive of the Department of Maps of the Navy. In 1797 its Director, Vice-Admiral François Étienne de Rosily conveyed them to Gaspard Monge, Former Navy Minister and at the time acting under the instructions of Bonaparte.

Following the outbreak of hostilities between France and Britain in 1778, an emissary of the French Governor of Pondicherry, Froment, succeeded to reach France travelling through Egypt. There, he met with the Naval Secretary, the Maréchal Charles Eugène de La Croix de Castries de Castries, and suggested the reopening of the Suez trade route. On his return to India, in 1782, to convey the news of the incoming peace treaty to Pondicherry, Froment journeyed again through Egypt drafting a map of the country and a report for his Governor, who relayed it to Paris.

Vergennes and Castries, however, tried to regain a foothold in India in 1781 by deploying a naval squadron under the command of Admiral Pierre André de Suffren to the Indian Ocean. The Indian card was the one that Bonaparte tried to play again in 1798-1799, without success.

Despite the naval victory of Cuddalore, the conclusion of the Peace Treaty of Paris in 1783 prevented further gains in India and the French only retained their remaining settlements of Pondicherry and Mahé, while Tipu, the new Sultan of

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18 Ferenc Tóth, «Un Hongrois en Égypte avant Napoléon. La mission secrète du baron de Tott», *Revue Historique des Armées* [en ligne], 2013.

Mysore, just waited for the next occasion to take revenge on the British East India Company.<sup>19</sup>

#### 4 *Choiseul-Gouffier's diplomatic offensive. Volney's essay and the rise of orientalism.*

The Paris Peace Treaty of 1783 was a diplomatic triumph for Vergennes<sup>20</sup>, sanctioning the defeat of Britain and the restoration of French prestige in the world, including in the Ottoman Empire.

Under these favourable auspices, the new French Envoy, Marie-Gabriel-Florent-Auguste Count of Choiseul-Gouffier, began his mission in Constantinople in 1784.

Despite the discouraging report of his predecessor on the futility of diplomatic efforts to open Egypt to French trade, Choiseul-Gouffier, in concert with Castries, mounted a diplomatic offensive both in Constantinople and in Cairo in order to achieve the goal set by Colbert more than one century before.

Availing himself of the expertise of the French naval officers sent by Castries to study the Ottoman coastal defences, he tasked two of them in sequel, de Bonneval and de La Prevalaye, to assess the viability of the Egyptian and Red Sea trade route. Finally, in 1785 he dispatched to Egypt Major of Vaisseau Laurent de Truguet with the mandate to gain from the Mameluke Mourad Bey freedom of movement for French goods from India to Marseille.

With the help of Charles Magallon, a well-connected merchant from Marseille, Truguet successfully negotiated and signed, on 10<sup>th</sup> January 1785, with the Beys, three agreements covering: the safe passage of French goods from Suez to Alexandria; assurances of security for the caravans; as well as low import duties for French goods in transit.

When Truguet reported to Choiseul-Gouffier on the treaties, which were subject to ratification by the Sublime Porte, the Envoy realized how he was close to a breakthrough and began his difficult negotiation with the Grand Vizier, despite the opposition of all other European envoys.

<sup>19</sup> George. A. BALLARD, *Rulers of the Indian Ocean*, B.R. Publishing Corporation, New Delhi, reprinted 2002, first published 1927.

<sup>20</sup> Bernard de MONTFERRAND, *Vergennes, la gloire de Louis XVI*, Taillandier, Paris, 2017.

However, to create facts on the ground and considering the delay in the negotiation caused by the downfall of the Grand Vizier, Choiseul-Gouffier dispatched some merchant ships to Suez. In fact, a vessel of the French Royal Navy with two Army officers on board, who were allowed to disembark and travel through Egypt, preceded the merchant ships

While Choiseul-Gouffier in Constantinople was leaving no stone unturned to obtain at least tacit Ottoman approval of the agreement reached with the Beys, de Castries had to face the opposition of the recently re-established “Compagnie des Indes”, which felt its monopoly on trade from India threatened.

An *arrêté* of the Comptroller-General of Finance, François Alexandre de Calonne, of April 14<sup>th</sup>, 1788, reserved the monopoly for the Company, in China, Japan and in the Red Sea while leaving an open door to trade in India. The inter-agency coordination in Paris saw the Chambers of Commerce of the main trading cities squarely opposed to the Company’s privileges. The process went on until the outbreak of the Revolution. The Constituent Assembly on August 5<sup>th</sup> 1789 finally abolished the Company’s monopoly on trade.

After the death of Vergennes, the Duke of Lauzun (Armand Louis de Gontaut-Biron), a hero of the American Revolution, advocated the Egyptian project with his successor, Armand Marc de Montmorin-Saint Hérem. Lauzun, who addressed to Montmorin several letters between July and October of 1787, proposed the seizure not only of Egypt but also of Cyprus, Crete, and Rhodes, with the consent of the Ottoman government. The goal was to counter the rising influence of the British and their alleged attempt to take control of the Egyptian trade route.<sup>21</sup>

In those years, Egyptomania and Orientalism were on the rise. Among the many travellers’ books, one of the most successful was *Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie* by the philosopher Constantin-François Chassebœuf de La Giraudais, known as Volney, which later became the reference guide for the officers who took part in Bonaparte’s expedition.

Volney’s most interesting essay was his *Considérations sur la guerre des Turcs avec les Russes*, of 1788, where he openly raised the issue of the possible takeover of Egypt by France. He concluded that such an endeavour would have

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21 François CHARLES-ROUX, *Autour d’une route. L’Angleterre, l’Isthme de Suez et l’Égypte au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Librairie Plon, Paris, 1922.

drawn France into three wars: the first with Turkey, the second with Britain and the third, and the most dangerous one, with the Egyptian population.

«D’abord, ..., il faudra soutenir trois guerres ; la première de la part de la Turquie ( ) la seconde, de la part des Anglais...la troisième enfin, de la part des naturels de l’Égypte et celle-là, quoiqu’en apparence la moins redoutable, serait en effet la plus dangereuse...Si des Français osaient y débarquer, Turcs, Arabes, paysans s’armeraient contre eux ; le fanatisme tiendrait lieu, d’art et de courage.»

Bonaparte’s expedition fulfilled Volney’s prophecy to the letter.

In 1792, young Lieutenant Napoleon Bonaparte along with his brother Luciano met Volney in Corsica, at the philosophers’ estate of Confina. Volney’s description of his oriental travels so impressed Bonaparte that he later asked the philosopher to join his expedition. Volney refused but Bonaparte took with him the *Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie*.

##### 5 *After the Revolution. Talleyrand’s new colonial policy.*

In the aftermath of the Revolution, France had tried to stay the course and continue Vergennes’ policy of friendship with the Sublime Porte. However, the execution of King Louis XVI and the ideological missionary zeal of some local Jacobins did not help in securing the recognition of the new French state by the Ottoman Government. While Choiseul Gouffier succeeded to remain as Ambassador to Constantinople until 1792, the Ottoman government, instigated by the Austrian and Prussian Envoys, refused to concede its *Agrément* to the new Envoy appointed by the Revolutionary Government, Huguet de Sémonville. Only in 1793, the Porte allowed a new Envoy of the French Republic, Marie Louis Descorches de Sainte Croix, to stay in Constantinople without official recognition until 1795.

With patience Saint Croix, who had previously served under Saint Priest, tried to renew the traditional good relationship with the Ottoman government by extending his contacts and his influence to the main dignitaries (the Capitan Pasha, the Reis Ul Kuttab, the Ulemas, the commanders of the Janissaries), with the clear objective of concluding a treaty of alliance.

When he was close to reach such a treaty, he had to leave his post, handing over the task and the honour to conclude the negotiations of a defensive alliance

between the French Republic and the Ottoman Empire to his successor, Raymond de Verninac Saint-Maur.

The Treaty, in 15 articles, committed the parties to put at the disposal of the attacked country 30,000 soldiers or an equivalent naval force. The Directory, to the great surprise of the Sublime Porte, did not ratify the Treaty signed, on 24<sup>th</sup> May 1796.<sup>22</sup> The British, however, took notice of Saint Croix and Verninac efforts to restore the traditional alliance between France and the Ottoman Empire.

In January 1795, Navy Captain William Sydney Smith, whose brother Spencer served at the time as Secretary in the British mission in Constantinople, addressed a letter to the Foreign Secretary, Lord Grenville, where he pointed out to the risk posed by France's alliance with the Ottoman Empire. In particular, he drew the attention of the Foreign Secretary on the threat to the trade route to India, forecasting well in advance the French occupation of Egypt. Sydney's warning at the time went unheeded but he should later play a decisive role in blocking Bonaparte's advance at St John of Acre.<sup>23</sup>

During his mission to Constantinople, Verninac had received a report by the French Consul General in Cairo, Charles Magallon, who described the harsh reality of French nationals in Egypt subject to the vexations and extortions of the Mameluke beys, Mourad and Ibrahim.

In his letter of 29 prairial an III (17 June 1795)<sup>24</sup> Magallon asked Verninac to request the Ottoman Government (the Diwan) to redress the grievances of the French nationals and, failing that, to consider direct military intervention. By taking control of Egypt, the French could have sent a military expedition to India with the clear goal of ending British rule. In his report to the Envoy, Magallon provided the strategic rationale for the subsequent Bonaparte's expedition.

«Je Te le répète, Citoyen, maîtres de la Mer Rouge, nous ne tarderons pas à donner la loi aux Anglais et à les chasser de l'Inde, si une pareille opération entrain dans les vues de notre gouvernement. Par Suez, dans la mousson favorable, on pourrait transporter, avec peu de navires, une quantité de troupes dans l'Inde. Nos soldats pourraient tout au plus, et en leur supposant le plus long voyage, ne rester que soixante jours en mer, au lieu

22 Gérard GROC, 'Les premiers contacts de l'Empire ottoman avec le message de la Révolution Française (1789-1798)', *CEMOTI*, n.12, Paris, 1991, online.

23 François CHARLES-ROUX, *Autour d'une route*, cit., *ibidem*.

24 CHARLES-ROUX, *Les Origines*, cit., *ibidem*.



que, par le cap de Bonne-Espérance, il n'est pas rare qu'ils mettent six mois à se rendre. Par Suez, on ne perdrait pas un homme sur cent, et par l'autre voie on serait trop heureux si on n'en perdait que dix pour cent».

Magallon had become Consul General of the French Republic in Cairo in 1793. Two years later, when he was on leave in France, he had established contacts with the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs, which had taken over from the Navy Secretariat the political and administrative responsibility for the Consulates.

This transfer of responsibility would have important consequences for the "Egyptian project", which had been previously fostered by the Navy Secretariat but consistently opposed by the Foreign Ministry.

Due to the uncertain status of the French Representative in Constantinople, Magallon started to report regularly to the Commission for External Relations of the National Convention. Magallon's reports through the turmoil of the years 1793-1795 at least raised the attention of the French government to the dire situation of its nationals in Egypt.

Despite the difficult situation of the Republic, engaged in a fight for survival against the powers of the First Coalition, the Commissioners were sensible to Magallon's plight and instructed Verninac to «deploy all his activities, political and religious» to ease the plight of French nationals in Egypt. In their response to Magallon's letters, the Commissioners evoked for the first time the use of force.

In particular, the new Director and Minister for External Relations, Charles Delacroix, carefully read two letters that Magallon had sent in October 1795 to his predecessor, Minister Jean-Victor Colchen.

The Minister promptly issued instructions to the Envoy in Constantinople to make a demarche to the Porte to obtain satisfaction for the French nationals and, at the same time, asked the head of the II Division of the Ministry, Boulouvard, to gather all necessary information on Egypt to appraise Magallon's project.

« (...) Je désirerais que vous réunissiez toutes les notions sur l'Egypte qui sont en votre pouvoir et qui pourraient nous mettre en état de juger du Mérite de la proposition indiquée à la fin de cette lettre (...) »<sup>25</sup>.

Thanks to his colourful reports that barely disguised his own business interests, Charles Magallon, the merchant of Marseille, had succeeded where Leibniz and Tott had previously failed, namely in attracting the interest of the Foreign

25 CHARLES-ROUX, *Les Origines, cit., ibidem*.

Ministry to the seemingly extravagant project of the conquest of Egypt. Another suggestion, put forward in the same months by Captain Real, highlighting the advantages of opening the trade route to India through Suez also drew the attention of Minister Delacroix.

Therefore, in July 1795, Verninac dispatched to Egypt a commissioner, Charles François Dubois-Thainville, an adventurer previously sent by the French revolutionary authorities to spy on Saint Croix. He received the instruction not only to re-establish the French nationals in Cairo but also to obtain the payment of credits due to them by the Mamelukes. Dubois-Thainville's mission, lasting four months between November 1795 and March 1796, was unsuccessful in redressing the grievances of the French colony although he had been received by Mourad and Ibrahim with all the honours due to a representative of the French Republic.

After a visit to Syria and to Smyrna, he reported in September 1796 that all the places of the Empire he had visited were in chaos and, failing a thorough process of reform by the Diwan, the Ottoman Empire was doomed. Egypt was an easy prey for everyone, especially the British, due to the prevailing anarchy and the growing differences between the Beys.

Dubois-Thainville forwarded copy of the report to the Ministry of External Relations in Paris. By August 1796, Boulouvard while authorizing his annual leave invited Magallon to Paris to discuss the situation in Egypt. A second letter to Magallon by Delacroix, in March 1797, explicitly evoked the use of force as the only way to make the Mamelukes comply with the Capitulation Treaties and protect the rights of French citizens.

«...Je vois, (...), qu'il n'y a que l'appareil de la force qui puisse ramener les beys au respect et au maintien de nos traités et capitulations (...) Il ne souffrira pas qu'un peuple qui a su se faire respecter par toutes les nations de l'Europe soit impunément outragé dans quelques-uns de ses membres par les despotes le plus subalternes»<sup>26</sup>.

The plan of an expedition to India, in the footsteps of Suffren's naval campaign of 1781-84, re-emerged in the course of 1796. The Directory, after the conclusion of peace treaties with Prussia and Spain, was considering French armed support to a republican insurgency in Ireland. An elaborate plan was prepared, which encompassed two naval operations: the first to land an expeditionary force

<sup>26</sup> CHARLES-ROUX, *Les Origines*, cit. *Ibidem*.

in Ireland under the command of General Lazare Hoche and the second to send a naval squadron from Brest to the Ile de France (Mauritius).

From there, the naval squadron under the command of Admiral Louis Thomas Villaret, who had previously fought under Suffren and was eager to come back to the Indian Ocean, would have shipped troops to India to support Tipu Sultan against the British.

The plan, however, aborted as General Hoche prevailed on Villaret-Joyeuse. The expedition to Ireland, led by Hoche in December 1796, failed miserably due to awful weather conditions. In August 1798 another expedition, led by General Jean Joseph Amable Humbert was, at the beginning, more successful. Eventually, the British defeated Humbert's troops, putting an end to French attempts of gaining a foothold on the British Isles.<sup>27</sup>

In the meantime, the Directory had appointed as new Envoy to Constantinople the former Director for War, Lieutenant General Jean-Baptiste Annibal Aubert du Bayet. Aubert du Bayet arrived in Constantinople in October 1796 accompanied by a military advisory team, which included artillerymen, engineers and naval officers with the task to improve the quality of the Ottoman technical services. Ironically, the artillerymen (Topadjis) trained by the military mission would prove their proficiency against the French Army at the siege of St John of Acre.

Aubert du Bayet, who reinstated France in his role as protector of the catholic faith in the Ottoman Empire and re-established the traditional military cooperation between Paris and Constantinople, died shortly afterwards in 1797.

On his way back to Paris, Verninac went to Leoben, in Styria, where General Bonaparte, the victorious commander of the Army of Italy, was negotiating an armistice with the Austrians. Meeting Bonaparte on April 1797, the Envoy offered the General some diplomatic advice on the negotiation with Vienna and, at the same time, reported to him on the situation in the Ottoman Empire, including Egypt.<sup>28</sup>

On July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1797, two weeks before becoming Minister of Foreign Affairs, Charles Maurice de Talleyrand Périgord publicly stated the advantages of an expedition to Egypt in order to establish a French colony there and threaten British

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27 CHARLES-ROUX, *Autour d'une route*, cit. *ibidem*.

28 Christopher HEROLD, *Bonaparte in Egypt*, Pen & Sword, New York, 2005.

rule in India.

He made this reference in a speech he delivered at the Institut de France, under the title: *Des avantages à retirer de colonies nouvelles*, where he fostered the acquisition of new colonies in Africa and the Mediterranean. Adopting the Egyptian project from a colonial and economic perspective, Talleyrand had heeded the advice of Choiseul and especially of Choiseul-Gouffier and Lauzun, who were close friends.

He recalled that, in 1769, Choiseul had already pointed out that the possession of Egypt could more than offset the loss of the American colonies, as the acquisition of Corsica had been more important than the loss of Canada.<sup>29</sup>

«...M. le duc de Choiseul, un des hommes de notre siècle qui a eu le plus d'avenir dans l'esprit, qui, déjà en 1769, prévoyait la séparation de l'Amérique de l'Angleterre et craignait le partage de Pologne, cherchait dès cette époque à préparer par des négociations la cession de l'Égypte à la France, pour se trouver prêt à remplacer par les même productions et par un commerce plus étendu les colonies américaines, le jour où elles nous échapperaient»<sup>30</sup>

When he became Foreign Minister, Talleyrand found out that his predecessor, Charles Delacroix, had already considered a possible military intervention in Egypt. As he would later (22 February 1798) write in confidence to the Prussian Ambassador, Sandoz-Rollin, the new colonial policy had also the goal of «drawing away the attention and the forces of the government from those revolutionary ideas that would turn Europe upside down»

«éloigner l'attention et les forces du gouvernement de ces idées révolutionnaires qui auraient bouleversé l'Europe»<sup>31</sup>.

In his plan, Talleyrand had also envisaged the return of France to India., after the recent loss of the colony of Pondicherry.

On July 23<sup>rd</sup>, he conveyed to the Directory three memoranda, where he stressed the advantages of an alliance with the Indian princes against the British.<sup>32</sup> In a further memo addressed to the Directory, *Mémoire abrégé sur l'Inde, eu égard*

29 Albert CANS, 'Les idées de Talleyrand sur la politique coloniale de la France au lendemain de la Révolution', *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, tome 2 N°1, Paris, 1900

30 François CHARLES-ROUX, *Les Origines*, cit. *ibidem*.

31 CANS, cit. *Ibidem*.

32 Clément de la JONQUIÈRE, *L'Expédition d'Égypte 1798-1801*, Henry Charles Lauvazelle, Paris, 1906.

*aux circonstances actuelles*, Talleyrand suggested to ship to India the troops earmarked for the invasion of the British Isles.<sup>33</sup>

## 6 Bonaparte's plan: *l'Expédition d'Égypte*.

Since an early date, the Orient had attracted Napoleon Bonaparte. His readings, both at the college of Brienne and at the Ecole Militaire of Paris, included Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* and his deep admiration of Alexander the Great is well known<sup>34</sup>. During his service at Valence, as a Second Lieutenant of the Regiment La Fère, he also read the contemporary reports of Savary, the Abbé Raynal, the Abbé Marigny as well as Volney's *Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte*. On several occasions, he stated his intention to seek glory in Asia and even in India, by joining the army of the British East India Company.

In the summer of 1795, Bonaparte's career had reached a critical point. He had refused to assume command of an infantry brigade in Vendée, as required by the Committee of Public Safety, but at the same time had proposed himself to take the lead of a military advisory group to Constantinople. In fact, Sultan Selim III had actually asked through Ambassador de Verninac the deployment of military advisors to train and advice the Ottoman Army.

Pending his request to return to artillery, Bonaparte had been temporarily assigned to the *Cabinet Topographique*, where he had the opportunity not only to read the archived papers on the military situation of the Ottoman Empire but also the reports of the Foreign Secretariat. He might also have read Tott's *Memoirs*.

At the end of August Bonaparte submitted a detailed memo to the Committee of Public Safety with a thorough planning of the advisory team's task and composition, suggesting to enlist some of the officers and NCO's who had taken part, under his command, in the siege of Toulon.

The young General's attraction for the Ottoman Empire could be related to his intention to marry Désirée Clary, the daughter of a wealthy silk manufacturer and merchant of Marseille, who was also his sister-in-law. He might have planned to settle in Constantinople with members of Clary's family and his brother Joseph, reconciling his military profession with the Levant business of his in-laws.

<sup>33</sup> de la JONQUIERE, *cit.*, *ibidem*.

<sup>34</sup> Jacques-Olivier BOUDON, Napoléon et l'hellénisme, *Anabases*, 20, Paris, 2014, online.

On September 15<sup>th</sup> the Committee of Public Safety, while not rejecting in principle his Turkish plan, decided to dismiss General Bonaparte from the Army due to his refusal to fight in Vendée.<sup>35</sup>

The repression by Bonaparte of a royalist insurrection in Paris on 13<sup>th</sup> vendémiaire (5<sup>th</sup> October) made of him the saviour of the Republic resulting in his promotion to Major General and commander of the Army of the Interior. A few months later, he assumed the long-coveted command of the Army of Italy. However, it was only at the end of his successful campaign in Italy, in the spring of 1797, that the idea of an expedition to Egypt began to take shape in the mind of the victorious General.

Master of Northern Italy, Bonaparte, who was negotiating the terms of peace with the Austrians after signing the preliminary agreement in Leoben, was already envisaging a Mediterranean strategy for France, looking forward to the partition of the Ottoman Empire.

At the end of 1796, following the loss of Corsica, Napoleon's victories in Northern Italy and the new Treaty of Alliance of San Ildefonso (August 19<sup>th</sup>) between the French Republic and the Kingdom of Spain, the Royal Navy, under the command of Admiral John Jervis had been forced out of the Mediterranean. The Mediterranean fleet withdrew to a temporary base on the river Tagus, while maintaining the vital base of Gibraltar. During 1797, the important naval victory of Cape Saint Vincent on the Spanish fleet had prevented its junction with the French fleet in Brest as well as the invasion of the British Isles. Nonetheless, the Royal Navy remained outside of the Mediterranean Sea for the rest of the year relinquishing its control to the French.<sup>36</sup>

The first target of Bonaparte, however, was not Egypt but the island of Malta at the time ruled by the Order of St John. In a letter to the Directory, on 26<sup>th</sup> May 1797 from his headquarters in Mombello, Bonaparte stressed the strategic importance of the island and the risk that it could fall under the influence of Austria.

The French Grand Master, Emmanuel de Rohan-Polduc was dying and his likely successor, Ferdinand von Hompesch zu Bolheim, was the envoy of the

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35 François HOUDECEK, Un projet avorté : Bonaparte chez les Turcs en 1795, *Revue du Souvenir Napoléonien*, 464, 27-32, Paris, 2006, online.

36 Gareth GLOVER, *The Forgotten War Against Napoleon, Conflict in the Mediterranean, 1793-1815*, Pen and Sword Military, Barnsley, South Yorkshire, 2017.



Holy Roman Emperor to the Order and the Habsburg candidate. Moreover, the King of Naples and Sicily, the nominal sovereign of Malta, could have been tempted to profit from the situation and occupy the island. Bonaparte, therefore, suggested enlisting the support of Spain, the new Bourbon ally of the French Republic, to foster the election of a Spanish Grand Master in place of the pro-Austrian Hompesch or to send a Spanish fleet to occupy the Maltese islands:

«...L'île de Malte est pour nous d'un intérêt majeur. Le grand maître est mourant : il paraît que ce sera un Allemand qui sera son successeur. Il faudrait 5 ou 600.000 francs pour faire faire grand maître un Espagnol. Ne serait-il pas possible d'insinuer au prince de la Paix de s'occuper de cet objet, qui est très essentiel ? La Valette a 37.000 habitants, qui sont extrêmement portés pour les Français ; il n'y a plus d'Anglais dans la Méditerranée ; pourquoi notre flotte, ou celle d'Espagne, avant de se rendre dans l'Océan, ne passerait-elle pas la Valette pour s'en emparer ? Les chevaliers ne sont que 500 et le régiment de l'Ordre n'est que de 600 hommes. Si nous ne prenons point ce moyen, Malte tombera au pouvoir du Roi de Naples. Cette petite île n'a pas de prix pour nous...».<sup>37</sup>

Despite its glorious past, the Order was in a state of decay. Military and naval efficiency had decreased and the Knights had lost the support of the Maltese population and of the local church. Grand Master de Rohan, pursuing a pro-French foreign policy had sent twenty of his Knights to fight with the French squadron of Admiral François Paul de Grasse during the American War of Independence. The US had awarded to Grand Master de Rohan the first American medal, the *Libertas Americana*, as well as membership of the Order of Cincinnati. Rohan had reciprocated by granting hospitality to American merchant ships in La Valletta.

Later, in 1794, the Order's chargé d'affaires in Paris, Cibon, offered to the US Envoy, James Monroe, further facilities to US ships in exchange for a territorial enclave in the US. The US, however, was not disposed to cede an inch of sovereignty on its territory to any European ruler.<sup>38</sup>

Furthermore, Malta had proved to be an invaluable base for the Venetian fleet in 1792 during the naval campaign of Admiral Angelo Emo against the Regency of Tunis.

The French Revolution badly affected the budget of the Order. By seizing the

<sup>37</sup> Clément de la JONQUIÈRE, *CIT.*, *ibidem*.

<sup>38</sup> Bruce Ware ALLEN, *A Proposed Alliance of the Knights of Malta and the United States of America*, *Journal of the American Revolution*, Westholme Publishing, Yardley PA, 2017.

valuable properties of the Order, the French Convention deprived it of a major source of revenue (580,406 Maltese Ecus, out of a total revenue of 4,315,296 Ecus). The subsequent French seizure of the Order's properties in Northern Italy only made things worse. Although officially neutral in the War of the First Coalition, the Order had granted hospitality to some *émigrés* and the level of diplomatic relations had reached its lowest point in centuries. The fact that the majority of the Knights belonged to the three French *Langues* of the Order had long been an asset of French diplomacy but now it represented a liability, due to the hostility of most of them to the new Republic. This perceived hostility was also the reason of the proposal to occupy Malta that a deputy of the National Convention, the Abbé Grégoire, advanced already in November 1792.

In September 1793, Grand Master de Rohan issued a statement (subsequently published in November as a *manifeste*) by which he refused to revoke the credentials of the King's envoy, Eugène de Seystre Chaumont, as well as to recognize the «pretended French Republic»<sup>39</sup>.

In 1795, the appointment as representative of the French Republic of the already resident consular agent, Jean André Caruson, in the place of Seystre Chaumont, did not improve bilateral relations. Since he had not been provided with the usual *lettres de créances*, he remained in Malta as Consul General.

Meanwhile, the new Russian Emperor, Paul 1<sup>st</sup> had transferred the Order's Priors of Poland to Saint Petersburg, ensuring a source of revenue for the indebted Order. The Grand Master replicated, in August 1797, by granting the Tsar the title of Protector of the Order.<sup>40</sup>

Since the negotiations with the Austrians had stalled, Bonaparte feared that the election of Hompesch as Grand Master, on July 13<sup>th</sup> 1797, would provide Austria with a naval base in the Mediterranean. Therefore, in his letter of August 16<sup>th</sup> from Milan, he informed the Directory of his intention to occupy, as a precautionary measure, the Venetian Ionian Islands with a view to the possible breakup of the Ottoman Empire. In the same letter, he evoked for the first time the conquest of Egypt.

39 Alain BLONDY, *L'Ordre de Malte au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, Des dernières splendeurs à la ruine*, Editions Bouchène, Saint Denis, 2002.

40 Muriel ATKIN, «The Pragmatic Diplomacy of Paul I: Russia's Relations with Asia, 1796-1801», *Slavic Review*, Vol 38, Issue 1, Cambridge, 1979.

« ... Les Îles de Corfou, de Zante et de Céphalonie sont plus intéressantes pour nous que toute l'Italie ensemble. Je crois que, si nous étions obligés d'opter, il vaudrait mieux restituer l'Italie à l'Empereur et garder les quatre îles, qui sont une source de richesse et de prospérité pour notre commerce. L'Empire des Turcs s'écroule tous les jours ; la possession de ces îles nous mettra à même de le soutenir, autant que cela sera possible, ou d'en prendre notre part. Les temps ne sont pas éloignés où nous sentirons que, pour détruire véritablement l'Angleterre, il faut nous emparer de l'Égypte. Le vaste empire ottoman, qui périclète tous les jours, nous met dans l'obligation de penser de bonne heure à prendre des moyens de conserver notre commerce du Levant ... »<sup>41</sup>

The Directory endorsed the new Mediterranean strategy and Talleyrand, to whom Bonaparte addressed a separate letter where he stated his intentions to take contact with the Pasha of Scutari. Hinting at the Egyptian project, Talleyrand welcomed the young General's strategy, which fitted quite well within the new colonial policy he had presented at the Institut de France only a month before:

« ...le Directoire approuve parfaitement l'occupation de Zante, Corfou et Céphalonie. Vous aurez vu, par une de mes précédentes dépêches, que le Directoire et vous vous êtes rencontrés à cet égard, et qu'il avait également nommé Cerigo comme bonne à occuper. Rien, au reste, n'est plus important que de nous mettre sur un bon pied avec l'Albanie, la Grèce, la Macédoine et autres provinces de l'empire turc d'Europe et même toute celles que baigne la Méditerranée, comme notamment l'Égypte qui peut nous devenir un jour d'une grande utilité. ... »<sup>42</sup>

The coup d'état of 18<sup>th</sup> fructidor (4<sup>th</sup> September) consolidated Bonaparte's standing in Paris and he felt confident enough to highlight the importance of seizing Malta in addition to the Ionian Islands and the Sardinian San Pietro Island. He also stressed Egypt's value as a compensation for the British takeover of the Cape of Good Hope. He exposed to the Foreign Minister, in his letter from Passariano of 13<sup>th</sup> September, his plans as follows:

« ...Je pense que désormais la grande maxime de la République doit être de ne jamais abandonner Corfou, Zante, etc. Nous devons, au contraire, nous y établir solidement ; nous y trouverons d'immenses ressources pour le commerce, et elles seront d'un grand intérêt pour nous dans les mouvements futurs de l'Europe. Pourquoi ne nous emparerions-nous pas de l'île de Malte ? L'Amiral Brueys pourrait très bien mouiller là et s'en emparer. Quatre cents chevaliers et, au plus, un régiment de cinq cents

41 Clément de la JONQUIÈRE, *cit. ibidem*.

42 Clément de la JONQUIÈRE, *cit. ibidem*

hommes sont la seule défense de la ville de La Valette. Les habitants, qui montent à plus de cent mille, sont très portés pour nous et fort dégoutés de leurs chevaliers, qui ne peuvent plus vivre et meurent de faim. Je leur ai fait exprès confisquer tous leurs biens en Italie. Avec l'île de Saint-Pierre, que nous à cédée le roi de Sardaigne, Malte, Corfou, etc., nous serons maîtres de toute la Méditerranée. S'il arrivait qu'à notre paix avec l'Angleterre nous fussions obligés de céder le cap de Bonne-Espérance, il faudrait nous emparer de l'Égypte. L'on pourrait partir d'ici avec vingt-cinq mille hommes, escortés par huit ou dix bâtiments de ligne ou frégates vénitiennes, et s'en emparer. L'Égypte n'appartient pas au Grand Seigneur. Je désirerais, Citoyen Ministre, que vous prissiez à Paris quelques renseignements pour me faire connaître quelle réaction aurait sur la Porte notre expédition d'Égypte.....»<sup>43</sup>

In his letter, for the first time, Bonaparte called the Egyptian project with the name it would go down in history: «*l'Expédition d'Égypte*». Talleyrand's reply was enthusiastic. In his reply on behalf of the Directory of September 23<sup>rd</sup> he not only stressed the need to prevent Austria from taking control of Malta but also focused on Egypt.

«Quant à l'Égypte, vos idées à cet égard sont grandes, et l'utilité doit en être sentie.»

He also shared Bonaparte's wrong assumption that the Ottoman government would give their consent to the French occupation of Egypt («Aujourd'hui, je me borne à vous dire que, si l'on faisait la conquête, ce devrait être pour la Porte, pour déjouer les intrigues russes et anglaises qui se renouvellent dans ce malheureux pays.»). Talleyrand highlighted the economic rationale of the expedition

«L'Égypte comme colonie, remplacerait bientôt les produits des Antilles et, comme chemin, nous donnerait le commerce de l'Inde».

Meanwhile, as it was customary for him, Bonaparte had started his planning in earnest. In order to plan the Maltese amphibious operation Bonaparte had already met at Passariano (September 21<sup>st</sup>) with Rear Admiral François Paul de Brueys d'Aigalliers, the commander of the naval squadron based in the Ionian Islands. There, Bonaparte had exposed to the Admiral his plan: the naval squadron, after embarking 2,000 troops in Corfou, should have taken control of Malta and left there a garrison on his route to Toulon. Bonaparte called this plan «la petite ex-

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43 Clément de la JONQUIERE, *cit. ibidem*.

pédition» in order to distinguish it from the «grande expédition»<sup>44</sup> *i. e.* the landing in Britain.

Thanks to Gaspard Monge, the highly esteemed mathematician and former Navy Minister – at the time in Italy as Commissioner for arts and science – Bonaparte obtained from the Director of the Ministry's Department of Maps, Vice Admiral Rosily, a dossier of 228 pages.

The dossier included: letters related to the mission to Egypt of the same Rosily with the Frigate *Venus* of 1787;

- a) a memo on Egypt by Admiral de Truguet of 1784;
- b) an exchange of letters of Froment with the Directors of the India Company; a memo of Choiseul-Gouffier for the same Company;
- c) a memo of former Minister de Castries on the trade with India; letters of Charles Magallon.

The second shipment of papers (274 pages) related to Egypt comprised:

- a) Tott's report on his mission;
- b) St Didier's memo;
- c) a memo by Consul Mure.

Despite the objections of the Navy Minister, Pléville de Pelley, who would have acknowledged Malta's neutrality without risking an invasion, the proposed acquisition of Malta was increasingly raising the attention of the Directory. Following a visit by an envoy of the Directory, to whom Bonaparte had mentioned the possibility of buying the island for 600,000 Francs (through bribery) Talleyrand confirmed the readiness to pay such an amount.

In order to get a complete picture of the political situation in Malta, Bonaparte sent there on a diplomatic mission, ostensibly with the goal of improving trade relations with the Island, the First Secretary of the French Legation in Genoa, Jean-Baptiste Etienne Poussielgue. The diplomat, who was a distant relative of the Captain of the Port of La Valletta, Antoine Poussielgue, remained in Malta from 25 December 1797 to 9 January 1798, to prepare the ground for the invasion. Poussielgue, who also met with the Grand Master, held a dozen of meetings

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44 Xavier Labat SAINT VINCENT, *La tentative avortée de la prise de Malte par les Français en mars 1798 : ordres, contrordres et ambiguïtés de la politique méditerranéenne du Directoire*, *Revue d'Histoire Maritime*, June, Paris, 2005.

with French sympathizers and made a reconnaissance of the Maltese Islands.

On his return to Milan on February 16th, he produced a thorough and detailed report, where he highlighted both the weak spots of the fortresses as well as the political situation and the feelings of the local population towards the Knights and the Grand Master, whom, he wrote, was quite popular among his subjects. He also added, in a confidential attachment, that the squadron of Brueys had no chances of taking Malta by surprise not even in conjunction with pro French insurgents. Only a massive invasion force could overcome the resistance of the Knights.

The conclusion of the Treaty of Campoformio, on October 17<sup>th</sup> 1797, however, put a temporary end to the Mediterranean strategy of Bonaparte. As argued by the General in conveying the text of the treaty to the Directory, peace with Austria, obtained at the high price of the handover of the Venetian mainland, now offered the opportunity to concentrate all efforts against Britain. Convinced by the argument, the Directory recalled Bonaparte and appointed him commander of the *Armée d'Angleterre* with the task of planning and executing the invasion of Britain. The young General, who realized the new urgency and tried, in vain, to abort Poussielgue's mission to Malta, took the new appointment seriously.

After a diplomatic mission to Rastatt, the venue of negotiations with the Holy Roman Empire, Bonaparte returned to Paris in early December and started the planning of the amphibious operations of his new Army, which was assembling near the port areas.

Nonetheless, before his departure, Bonaparte issued orders to Brueys to embark in Corfu an infantry demi-brigade of 1,600 troops in addition to the 1,400 already at his disposal, to be prepared for the «petite expédition».

Brueys, decided to dispatch two frigates, *La Justice* and *L'Artémise*, on a reconnaissance to Malta where they arrived on December 16<sup>th</sup> and left on 23<sup>rd</sup> not before leaving ashore an officer of Maltese origin, Joseph Frendo, to recruit sailors and gather intelligence.

Later, on his way back to Toulon from the Ionian Islands, Brueys tried to accomplish the «*petite expédition*» by himself, envisaging to land 1,400, troops overnight relying on the support of two Maltese Jacobins, Vincenzo Barbara, and Antonio Calandri, who should have raised the population against the Knights.

The two Maltese convinced the Admiral of the unfeasibility of the plan, which



would end in disaster because of lack of previous preparation. Brueys, who appeared on March 3<sup>rd</sup> 1798 in front of La Valletta with his squadron decided to send in the Grand Harbour a former Venetian vessel, *Le Frontin*, to reconnoitre the facility and disembark the two Maltese.

The rest of the squadron deployed in line of battle in front of the port for demonstrative purposes. Brueys finally left Malta for Toulon on March 10<sup>th</sup> not before having welcomed on board a delegation of three Knights whom he reassured about the friendly attitude of the French Republic. While the attempt to take Malta by surprise failed and led to the demise of the «*petite expédition*», Brueys's naval demonstration proved that Malta was a low-hanging fruit and that a more powerful and organized expeditionary force could easily overcome the resistance of the Knights.

Three months later, on June 9<sup>th</sup>, Bonaparte's powerful invasion force would land 15,000 troops on the Maltese islands forcing the Order of St John to surrender in three days.

While Bonaparte was preparing the invasion of Britain only to realize its impossibility due to the weakness of the French Navy, Talleyrand was overwhelmed by suggestions coming from many self-appointed experts on the advisability of going east, not only to Egypt but as far as to India.

As recorded in the archives of the Foreign Ministry, citizen Anquetil sent a memo: *Observations sur les intérêts politiques et commerciaux de la France et de la Turquie relativement l'une à l'autre*, which, inspired by Saint Priest's report to Louis XVI, advocated the re-opening of the ancient trade route to India through Egypt. On the same line was the memo, *Notes sur l'Égypte*, of a former Consul at Alexandria, who suggested negotiating with the Mameluke beys.

Charles-Guillaume Thérémin, a French diplomat of Prussian origin, in his *Combinaisons pour le cas où l'affaiblissement de l'Empire ottoman entraînerait sa destruction en Europe*, suggested the seizure of Varna, Constantinople, the Aegean Islands and Egypt. French control of the Ottoman Empire and of Egypt would have forced Britain out of the Levant and left it with the route around the Cape of Good Hope as the only line of communication with India.

A former clergyman like Talleyrand, Victor Delpuech de Comeiras, conveyed a detailed memo, *Considérations sur la possibilité, l'intérêt et les moyens qu'aurait la France de rouvrir l'ancienne route de commerce de l'Inde, accompagnées*

*de recherches sur l'isthme de Suez et sur la jonction de la Mer Rouge à la Méditerranée.* He proposed to conquer Egypt and seize control of the trade routes from the Mediterranean to the Eastern seas. He also hinted at the “young general’s” (Bonaparte) role in the endeavour. It is therefore possible that Delpuech de Comeiras was aware of Bonaparte’s planning in Italy.

An official of the Navy Ministry, Bernard Thomas Tréhouart de Beaulieu, submitted to the Directory a memo on *La nécessité de chasser les Anglais des Indes orientales.*

Tréhouart’s plan was to send a naval expedition to India while deploying troops on the Channel coast as a cover. A former officer of the Compagnie des Indes, Jacques Alexandre Gourlade, submitted to the Directory a similar project to carry the war to British India.

In January 1798, a Captain of the Engineer Corps, Joseph Félix Lazowsky, who had advised the Ottoman Army, suggested to the Ministry of War to terminate the alliance with the Turks and occupy both Egypt and the Aegean Islands. He drafted a detailed study for the Ministry and he subsequently joined the Armée d’Orient.

Another plan, *Plan détaillée d’une expédition dans l’Inde par la voie de terre,* recorded in the Archives of the Ministry of War, proposed to stick to the traditional alliance with Turkey. A French expeditionary corps of 20,000 troops, joined along the way by Ottoman and Persian contingents, would have reached India through Persia, on the footsteps of Alexander the Great.

It was Charles Magallon, however, as admitted by the same Talleyrand («...J’étais, avec Magallon, consul en Égypte, l’auteur de cette grande entreprise») who mainly contributed to the proposal that Talleyrand submitted to the Directory on February 14<sup>th</sup> 1798.

In fact, Charles Magallon, met in early February with the Minister and submitted to him a memo (*Mémoire sur l’Égypte*). The memo, as usual, recalled the persecution of the French citizens by the Mamelukes and the urgency to put an end to such a shameful situation by invading the country. The economic advantages of taking Egypt, in terms of increased agricultural production and trade opportunities with the Orient, more than compensated the possible sacrifice of the other *échelles du Levant* in the Ottoman Empire. Magallon assessed that 20,000-25,000 troops would be enough to defeat the 8,000 soldiers of the Mameluke Army. The

convoy of transports, to be escorted by 4-5 ships of the line and 6 frigates, should have departed from Toulon or Corfu on June 15<sup>th</sup> to be in Alexandria on July 5<sup>th</sup>. No mention was made of landing in Malta or using it as a steppingstone to Egypt.

The memo included the usual reference to India, both ways. For the French, Egypt would be the springboard for an expedition of 15,000 troops to join with Tipu Sultan Army of Mysore and expel the British from India. However, if France were not quick to conquer Egypt, the British would do it with an expeditionary force from India of 15,000 Sepoys and 5-6,000 European troops.

The contents of Magallon's paper were almost completely taken on board in the report, *Rapport sur la question d'Égypte*, which Talleyrand submitted to the Directory on February 14<sup>th</sup>, recognizing the valuable contribution of Magallon:

«... J'ai là-dessus, dit-il, consulté l'homme qui a les plus longtemps résidé en Égypte et que la Providence semble avoir voulu conserver pour l'avantage de la République».

Talleyrand, however, in his presentation added some remarks on the likely reaction of the Ottoman authorities to the French invasion of Egypt.

Deeming a declaration of war by the Porte unlikely, as it would cost it the loss of Morea, Macedonia and Albania, the Foreign Minister did not consider the risk of ending the old alliance with the Sultan. At the same time, he stressed the need to send to Constantinople a new envoy, who should have been clever and firm. Talleyrand also suggested putting the expedition under the authority of a civilian triumvirate to provide political overview.

Being away from Paris on an inspection tour of the ports of the Channel, Bonaparte was completely unaware of the plan jointly developed by Magallon and Talleyrand and submitted by the Foreign Minister to the Directory. Considering the disparaging remarks that Bonaparte scribbled in the margins of the text of Talleyrand's presentation<sup>45</sup>, the Minister in all likelihood had not consulted the General beforehand.<sup>46</sup>

In his own report to the Directory of February 23rd, Bonaparte stressed the difficulties of invading England due to the unpreparedness of the Navy and suggested, instead, two alternative courses of action. Within the framework of the

45 «Plan bon pour une caravane de marchandises».

46 Clément de la JONQUIÈRE, *cit. Ibidem*, the text of the *Rapport au Directoire Exécutif, sur la conquête de l'Égypte*, is included (pages 154-168).

continental strategy, he suggested to invade the Electorate of Hanover and occupy Hamburg. Coming back to the Mediterranean strategy he proposed, as an alternative plan, an expedition to the Levant in order to threaten British trade with India (« ...Ou bien faire une expédition dans le Levant qui menaçât le commerce des Indes...»). If the Directory did not choose any of the three options (landing in Britain, invasion of Hanover or expedition to the Levant) Bonaparte advised to make peace with Britain:

«...Et si aucune de ces trois opérations n'est faisable, je ne vois plus d'autre moyen que de conclure la paix avec l'Angleterre...».

The Directory, after discussing Bonaparte's report on 24-25<sup>th</sup>, decided to proceed with the original plan and established a commission, chaired by Rear Admiral Jean-Baptiste Raymond de Lacrosse and funded with four million Francs, to take all preparatory measures requested by the Commander in chief. In the meantime, the concentration of transport ships, boats and gunboats in the ports of Le Havre and Dunkirk went on unabated. In addition, Talleyrand instructed the Envoy in The Hague – ironically the former Foreign Minister Delacroix, the first to have considered the Egyptian project - to request from the Batavian Republic the delivery of the already promised ships.

The report of General Louis Charles Antoine Desaix on his inspection tour of Brest and of the Brittany, delivered on February 27<sup>th</sup>, only reinforced his Commander's doubts about the feasibility of the cross-channel operation. The report of the interim Navy Minister, Charles Joseph Mathieu Lambrechts, on the state of the port of Brest was less than encouraging and corroborated Bonaparte's views. It was around March 2<sup>nd</sup> that the Directory probably decided to suspend the preparations for the invasion of Britain and to issue counter orders accordingly, including new instructions to The Hague.

On March 5<sup>th</sup>, Bonaparte submitted his own plan for the conquest of Malta and Egypt and to the Directory.

In the first sketch, Bonaparte required an expeditionary corps of 27,400 troops - 24,600 infantry and 2,800 cavalry – with artillery (60 field guns and 40 siege howitzers) and engineer support units to be embarked in different ports of France and Italy (Marseille, Toulon, Nice, Antibes, Ajaccio, Genoa, Civitavecchia).

The naval division of Toulon with 13 ships-of-the-line and 7 frigates, under the command of Vice-Admiral de Brueys, should have escorted the convoy,

Brueys, who was in command of the most powerful naval squadron in the Mediterranean, had recently reconnoitred the Grand Harbour in Malta. The Directory granted full authority to Bonaparte to organize the expedition while keeping the secret in every detail.

He started to do so at full speed under every aspect, both for the Army units, which should reach the total of 30, 000 troops, and for the naval units, including the Admiral ship *L'Orient*, with 118 cannons onboard one of the most powerful ship-of-the line in service.

The strategic guidelines the Directory gave to the Commander of the newly formed *Armée d'Orient* on April 12<sup>th</sup>, with a secret *arrêté*, were as follows:

«Article Premier: le général en chef de l'armée d'Orient dirigera sur l'Égypte les forces de terre et de mer dont le commandement lui est confié, et il s'emparera de ce pays....

Art 2: il chassera les Anglais de toutes les possessions de l'Orient où il pourra arriver, et notamment il détruira tous leurs comptoirs sur la mer Rouge....

Art 3: il fera couper l'isthme de Suez, et il prendra les mesures nécessaires pour assurer la libre et exclusive possession de la Mer Rouge à la République Française....

Art 4: il améliorera par tous les moyens qui seront en son pouvoir le sort de naturels de l'Égypte;

Art 5: Il maintiendra, autant qu'il dépendra de lui, une bonne intelligence avec le Grand Seigneur et ses sujets immédiats.

A separate *arrêté* covered the occupation of Malta. The outright aggression, in flagrant violation of its neutrality, was justified by a vague reference to the statement of the former Grand Master of 1793 (see above) and to the safe haven provided to French émigrés. Therefore, the Directory ordered to occupy Malta, adding, however a note of caution in a separate *arrêté*:

« il s'emparera de l'Île de Malte, mais qu'autant qu'il le jugera possible sans compromettre le succès des autres opérations dont il est chargé. »<sup>47</sup>

The objectives of the expedition in a priority order were quite clear:

- 1) to conquer Egypt;
- 2) to expel the British from every possession in the Orient which the General will

47 Désiré LACROIX, *Bonaparte en Égypte (1798-1799)*, Garnier, Paris, 1899.

be able to reach and, notably, from all their commercial stations in the Red Sea;

- 3) to cut the isthmus of Suez and take all necessary measures to guarantee to the French Republic the exclusive mastery of the Red Sea;
- 4) to improve as much as possible the welfare of the local population.
- 5) to keep as far as he was concerned, good relations with the Ottoman government and his subjects.
- 6) to occupy the island of without jeopardizing the attainment of the other objectives.

The guidelines did not mention explicitly an expedition to India. However, the preamble of the *arrêté* stressed the need to open a new route, after the loss of the Dutch colony of the Cape of Good Hope, to attack the allies of Britain in India. The goal was to extinguish the source of the corrupting wealth of Britain («...il importe d'ouvrir aux forces républicaines une autre route pour y arriver a combattre les satellites du gouvernement anglais et y tarir les sources de ses richesses corruptrices»).

To this purpose, another *arrêté*, put at the disposal of the commander of the *Armée d'Orient*, the frigates based in the Ile de France that, together with transport ships, should have reached Suez.<sup>48</sup>

The Directory's objectives included the excavation of the canal between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. This project, as mentioned above, had been proposed not only by Leibniz but also, in the course of the XVIII Century, by Savary and lastly by Delpuech-Comeiras, who should have been aware of both Talleyrand's and Bonaparte's intentions. Moreover, the Directory instructed Bonaparte to improve, the sake of the Egyptians and to keep good relations with the Sultan's representatives.

With reference to this diplomatic task, Bonaparte was convinced that Talleyrand would have resigned from the Ministry to assume the position of Envoy to Constantinople. Talleyrand, of course, did not even consider travelling to Constantinople nor risked to send there, in the new circumstances, a new Envoy to replace Aubert du Bayet. The chargé d'affaires, Pierre Ruffin, went to prison on

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48 Ozan OZAVCI, *Dangerous Gifts: Imperialism, Security and Civil Wars in the Levant*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2021.

12 September 1798 soon after the Ottoman declaration of war to France.

The expedition to Egypt was only part of Bonaparte's overall strategy against Britain. The day after the Directory had detailed the objectives of the Egyptian enterprise, Bonaparte submitted to it a «*Note on war with Britain*», where he proposed to gradually replace the ships of Brueys' squadron with nine former Venetian vessels complemented by three more ships manned by crews of the Ligurian Republic.

Brueys' squadron, jointly with the Atlantic fleet in Brest and the fleet of the Batavian Republic, should have invaded Britain by the end of the year (presumably under the command of a victorious General Bonaparte). The Directory conveyed the plan, with some modifications to the Navy Ministry, where it remained a dead letter, after the annihilation of Brueys' squadron in Abukir on August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1798, and the failure of Humbert's expedition to Ireland.

It is not within the scope of this essay to deal with the well-known campaign of Egypt,<sup>49</sup> started with the departure of an invasion force of 36,000 troops from Toulon on May 19<sup>th</sup>, 1798, continued through the occupation of Malta and the defeat of the Mamelukes at the battle of the Pyramids.<sup>50</sup>

Nelson's naval victory of Abukir left the French expeditionary corps stranded in Egypt. The Syrian campaign ended in strategic failure after Bonaparte's setback at the siege of St John of Acre. The failed siege was mainly due to the joint efforts of Commodore Sydney Smith of the Royal Navy and of a former fellow cadet of Bonaparte, Antoine Le Picard de Phélippeaux.

The withdrawal from Syria, at a high cost of human lives, left the French Army exposed to new offensives by the Turks and the British.

After routing an Ottoman expeditionary force landed at Abukir, Bonaparte sailed, in August 1799, to France leaving in command General Jean-Baptiste Kléber. Bonaparte, after a successful coup d'état, became the First Consul and undisputed ruler of the French Republic. He subsequently defeated the forces of the Second Coalition, concluding peace treaties with Austria, at Lunéville in 1801 and finally, with Britain in 1802, at Amiens.

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49 Alfred. T. MAHAN, *The Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution and Empire, 1793-1812*, Little Brown, Boston, 1894.

50 David CHANDLER, *The Campaigns of Napoleon*, Scribner, London, 1966



The French troops in Egypt fought bravely against British and Ottoman forces. The main British invasion force under General Ralph Abercrombie landed in Alexandria in March 1801 while a British expeditionary corps sailing from India landed in Suez. The Indian corps, however, joined the main force only at the end of the campaign. The successor of Kléber, General Jacques-François de Menou, finally surrendered to the British with the remaining 13,000 French soldiers in August 1801.

Similar was the fate of Malta, where the British, the Portuguese and the Russians supported a revolt of the local population against French rule. The French garrison surrendered to the British in September 1800. Malta would remain the main naval base of the British Mediterranean fleet until 1967.

The landing of Bonaparte in Egypt in the summer of 1798 had rung an alarm bell also in British India.<sup>51</sup> There, the new Governor General, Richard Colley Viscount of Wellesley, and his brother Arthur (later to become Duke of Wellington) started preparations for war as soon as they knew of the renewal of the alliance between Sultan Tipu of Mysore and the French Republic. Informed by Nelson of the victory at Abukir, the two brothers expelled the French from Hyderabad and started the Fourth Anglo-Mysore war, which ended in May 1799 with the capture of Seringapatam and the death of Sultan Tipu.<sup>52</sup>

The next step was the temporary occupation of the strategic island of Perim in the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb in 1799, which later (1839) led to the establishment of a British naval base in Aden.<sup>53</sup>

### *Conclusion*

For over two centuries, French diplomacy had regarded the Franco-Ottoman Alliance as a cornerstone of trade policy and an effective counterbalance first to the Habsburg powers and later to Russia. Since Colbert's times an avowed goal of French trade policy had been the reopening of the ancient trade route between the Mediterranean and India. The route had to pass overland through Egypt. Since

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51 Halford Lancaster HOSKINS, *British Routes to India*, Longmans, Green and Co, New York, Toronto, London, 1928.

52 Richard HOLMES, *Wellington: The Iron Duke*, Harper Collins, London, 2002

53 Alexander MIKHABERIDZE, *The Napoleonic Wars. A Global History*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2020.

the XVII century, however, French diplomats scientists and merchants had suggested both to the Sublime Porte and to the French government the excavation of a canal between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. In fact, a canal connecting the Mediterranean through the Nile had existed in Roman and Byzantine times. In the age of sail, however, the project made little sense and came back to life with the advent of steamboat navigation.

Therefore, since the very beginning, the goal was India and Egypt was the passageway.

In the second half of the XVIII century, the French Navy Secretariat began to consider the occupation of Egypt in case of a breakup of the Ottoman Empire. The war plan envisaged by Baron de Tott for the seizure of Egypt was the closest to Bonaparte's plan. Wisely, Foreign Secretary Vergennes rejected out of hand any plan of conquest or dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire. After the Revolution, the French Republic tried once again to revive the ancient alliance. The lobbying efforts by Charles Magallon, the Consul General in Cairo, on Ministers Delacroix and Talleyrand, gradually convinced the Directory to adopt a new colonial policy. The conquest of Egypt would have not only compensated the loss of the American colonies but would have also offered France a springboard for the invasion of India and the ultimate defeat of its archenemy, Britain.

The new colonial policy of Talleyrand met with the new Mediterranean strategy of Bonaparte. Bonaparte, initially, had detailed plans only for the takeover of Malta, which he considered key to controlling the Mediterranean. The high risks of the invasion of the British Isles, highlighted by the dismal failure of Hoche's expedition to Ireland, convinced the Directory to launch the Egyptian expedition. To his credit, Bonaparte had suggested other options, such as the seizure of Hanover and the negotiation of a Peace Treaty.

The expedition, which will go down in history for his contribution to Egyptology and the involvement of a number of scientists (*les savants*)<sup>54</sup>, ended in complete strategic failure. Not only it allowed the Royal Navy to re-enter the Mediterranean, establishing its main naval base in Malta, but it also brought together

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54 COMMISSION DES ARTS E DES SCIENCES, *Description de l'Égypte. Recueil des observations et des recherches qui ont été faites en Égypte pendant l'expédition de l'Armée française, publié par les ordres de Sa Majesté l'Empereur Napoléon le Grand*, Imprimerie impériale, Paris, 1809.

former enemies such as Russia and the Ottoman Empire, who joined Austria and Britain in the Second Coalition.

The French campaign was also the first western occupation of an Islamic country. The first reaction of the local population to the invasion of the French republicans was the revolt of Cairo. Notwithstanding the immediate and harsh repression of the uprising, the insurgency went on until the end of the campaign.

French rule in Egypt became part of the Napoleonic legend and its legacy contributed to subsequent French efforts to get a foothold in the country as well as to the landmark achievement of the excavation of the Suez Canal under the leadership of Ferdinand de Lesseps.

The new ruler of Egypt, the Albanian Pasha Muhammad Ali, took Napoleon as a model. While officially restoring Constantinople's authority in Egypt and pushing back a British attempt, in 1807, to invade Egypt, Muhammad Ali, effectively started the modernization of Egypt and established the first nation State in the Levant.<sup>55</sup>

Subsequent French involvement in the *Compagnie Universelle du canal maritime de Suez* did not restore France's position in Egypt. On the contrary, it played into the hands of Britain, the hegemonic sea power, which finally seized Egypt in 1882.

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<sup>55</sup> Edouard DRIAULT, *La Question d'Orient depuis ses origines jusqu'à la Paix de Sèvres (1920)*, Librairie Félix Alcan, Paris, 1921.

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A Smart Macaroni, Caricature from "Martial Macaroni", in Anne S. K. Brown Military Collection. Courtesy by Brown University (see West, «The Darly Macaroni Prints and the Politics of "Private Man.»», *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 25.2 [2001], pp.170-1.

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