

Great Britain to France, 31-05-1945

Syria, a former French colony, declared independence in 1941. After Vichy France had been defeated, General de Gaulle sought to re-establish French influence and ensure the officially acknowledged privileged status of France in Syria. Syria's aspirations for self-determination were supported by Great Britain – which had forces on the ground – as well as by other great powers, most importantly the United States and the Soviet Union.¹ For the first months of 1945, troubles had been brewing both in Syria and Lebanon (another former French colony) featuring occasional anti-French demonstrations. In late 1944, Syria decided to start building up the capabilities of its *gendarmérie* forces while France continued to oversee a contingent of special forces. France opposed this but a deal was struck in which the Great Britain provided the *gendarmérie* with equipment.² Then, in early 1945, the Syrian government declared its intention to develop its own national army. Unsurprisingly, this announcement met with considerable opposition from France.³ After yet another anti-French demonstration at the beginning of February 1945, a French garrison of forces stationed in Damascus took to the streets to conduct a show of force. Subsequently, the Syrian government requested that the forces would refrain from venturing outside their quarters in the future.⁴ The request did not go down well with the French government in Paris. It declared that 'France is absolutely determined to preserve her pre-eminent position', and dispatched additional armed forces to Syria to show and bolster its determination.⁵ Negotiations about the status of Syria and the transfer of sovereignty continued between the two French and Syrian governments. These were abrogated by Syria on 19 May citing dissatisfaction with the French terms.⁶ The second half of May saw public life in Syria coming to a standstill with riots taking place around the country. French forces bombarded Homs and Hama and then proceeded to take on Damascus on 29 May from the air. Syrian demonstrators and French forces clashed heavily. Casualty numbers, according to different estimates, reached between 400 and 600 killed and between 800 and 2,000 wounded.⁷ The government of Great Britain pressured for a cease fire; it did so not only in Syria but also in London, where the French ambassador met with Churchill. The United States supported Great Britain.⁸ Although the French agreed to a cease fire, the orders never reached the French commander in theatre and low level fighting continued.⁹ Churchill then sent French leader de Gaulle the following message on 31 May (which was shared with the House of Commons by the Secretary of Foreign Affairs Eden):

In view of the grave situation which has arisen between your troops and the Levant states and the severe fighting which has broken out, we have with profound regret ordered the Commander in Chief in the Middle East to intervene to prevent a further effusion of blood, in the interests of the whole Middle East, which involves communications for the war against Japan. In order to avoid a collision between the British and French forces we request you immediately to order the French troops to cease fire and to withdraw to their barracks. Once

¹ George Edward Kirk, *Survey of International Affairs 1939-1946. The Middle East in the War* (Oxford University Press, 1953), 288–94. See esp. 293.

² Kirk, 288.

³ Kirk, 289.

⁴ Kirk, 290.

⁵ Kirk, 290.

⁶ Kirk, 295.

⁷ Kirk, 296–98. Longrigg, *Syria and Lebanon under French Mandate*, 349.

⁸ Howard Morley Sachar, *Europe Leaves the Middle East, 1936-1954* (London: Allen Lane, 1974), 321.

⁹ Longrigg, *Syria and Lebanon under French Mandate*, 348.

firing has ceased and order has been restored we shall be prepared to begin tripartite talks here in London.¹⁰

The British Middle East Commander Paget dispatched a local commander to present the following more precise instructions to his French counterpart Oliva-Roget in Syria on 1 June:

I am instructed by the C.-in-C. Middle East to communicate to the following orders:

You have no longer any authority, except the disciplinary authority over your own troops in their barracks

I am taking the responsibility of assuring the protection of the French barracks and installations in Damascus

That being so, there will therefore in no circumstances be any excuse whatever for French troops to open fire in their own defence.

I also warn you that, should any French troops open fire, the barracks of these troops will be immediately bombarded. I have personally given these orders to my troops.

All look-out posts on the roofs must be withdrawn. If they are not immediately withdrawn, force will be used.

All armoured units without exception will be withdrawn to barracks.

No French soldier will go out into the streets without my authorization.

Please acknowledge receipt of this communication.¹¹

While de Gaulle did not offer an official reply, and told his forces to disregard any British directives, he also gave orders to act cautiously and not to resist the presence of British troops.¹² Yet, the French forces in Damascus stood down and were escorted – in conjunction with French civilians – to a camp outside the city. Three French soldiers who ventured out into the streets were murdered by local citizens. British forces took over control of the city including the administration of the food supply.¹³ From the start, the French government distrusted the British government and accused it of double play; its real intention being to incorporate Syria into the British sphere of influence, which the British government – of course – denied.¹⁴ In the period thereafter, Syria – in tandem with Lebanon and supported by the recently established Arab League – called for the withdrawal of French forces and the transfer of command of the remaining forces that were still under French command. France agreed to the transfer in early July 1945. The governments of Great Britain and France agreed to a joint withdrawal by the end of 1945 but when this stalled, unrest spread oncemore across Syria and Lebanon. When the two countries brought up the issue at the first meeting of the United Nations General Assembly, it created the necessary momentum. By mid-April

¹⁰ Emile Chabal and Robert Tombs, eds., *Britain and France in Two World Wars: Truth, Myth and Memory* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 188; 'To Intervene - De Gaulle Asked to Withdraw Troops', *Examiner*, 1 June 1945.

¹¹ Kirk, *Survey of International Affairs 1939-1946. The Middle East in the War*, 299.

¹² Sachar, *Europe Leaves the Middle East, 1936-1954*, 321–22. Chabal and Tombs, *Britain and France in Two World Wars*, 189.

¹³ Kirk, *Survey of International Affairs 1939-1946. The Middle East in the War*, 299. Longrigg, *Syria and Lebanon under French Mandate*, 349.

¹⁴ Sachar, *Europe Leaves the Middle East, 1936-1954*, 213–17. Kirk, *Survey of International Affairs 1939-1946. The Middle East in the War*, 300–301.

all European forces had been repatriated.¹⁵ The government of Great Britain had attained the objectives stipulated in its ultimatum. It did leave De Gaulle bitter, who told the British ambassador already on June 4 1945: 'We are not, I admit, in a position to open hostilities against you at the present time. But you have insulted France and betrayed the West. This cannot be forgotten.'¹⁶

¹⁵ Longrigg, *Syria and Lebanon under French Mandate*, 354–55.

¹⁶ Sachar, *Europe Leaves the Middle East, 1936-1954*, 323.