The French Decision to Invade Egypt (1798)

> "Soldiers:You are about to undertake a conquest the effects of which, on civilization and commerce, are incalculable. The blow you are about to give to England will be the best aimed, the most sensibly felt, she can receive until the time arrives when you can give her her death-blow."
>
> Bonaparte to his troops embarking for Egypt, June 1798

What was the political and economic state of Egypt on the eve of the French invasion?
Although formally an Ottoman province, Egypt was effectively ruled by rival Mamluk beys, Ibrahim Bey Muhammad and Murad Bey Muhammad, whose oppressive and factional leadership weakened the state. The population of three to four million faced famine, disease, and heavy taxation, with little sense of national unity. The government's decay and Egypt's strategic location on the route to Asia made it a tempting target for European powers seeking both prestige and control over trade.

Why did France invade Egypt in 1798?
France invaded Egypt to strike indirectly at Great Britain, its principal rival, by threatening British trade routes to India. Unable to risk a direct invasion of the British Isles due to naval weakness, the Directory—advised by Talleyrand and Bonaparte—saw Egypt as strategically vital and economically promising, with access to the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. The expedition also diverted Bonaparte's ambition from domestic politics and was publicly framed as liberating Egyptians from Mamluk rule, a pretext for conquest.

What role did Talleyrand play in advocating for and justifying the Egyptian expedition?
In February 1798, Foreign Minister Talleyrand proposed that Egypt "must become a province of the French Republic," arguing it could undermine Britain's communications with India and secure French commercial dominance in the Eastern Mediterranean. He advised feigning an invasion of England to distract the Royal Navy, allowing the fleet safe passage. To the Ottoman sultan, he proposed to present the expedition as restoring Ottoman authority over rebellious Mamluks, a diplomatic fiction intended to delay an inevitable Anglo-Ottoman alliance against France.

What were the main counterarguments or concerns raised within the French leadership?
Critics warned that sending France's best general and troops far from Europe risked overextension, especially with renewed continental war likely. Invading an Ottoman province endangered the long-standing Franco-Ottoman alliance, and the plan appeared to contradict

republican principles by pursuing colonial conquest. Logistical concerns were severe: France's navy was too weak to ensure secure supply lines, a vulnerability that materialized when Nelson destroyed the French fleet at the Battle of the Nile, leaving the army stranded.

How did Napoleon Bonaparte's personal ambitions influence the decision?
After his victories in Italy, Bonaparte saw Egypt as a way to harm Britain and as a base for an eventual Eastern empire, drawing inspiration from Alexander the Great. The campaign offered him his first opportunity to govern and to expand his political authority. Some Directors supported the plan partly to remove him from Paris, where his popularity and ambition had begun to threaten the stability of the Directory.

In what ways did France see Egypt as an economic asset?
With the loss of key colonies in the Americas and the British naval blockade restricting overseas trade, French leaders sought new possessions to supply essential goods and markets. Egypt appeared an ideal substitute—able to produce cotton, sugar, and other commodities formerly sourced from the New World, while serving as a secure outlet for French exports. Merchants in Marseilles strongly backed the plan, seeing in Egypt both a profitable market for their goods and a base for expanding French trade in the Eastern Mediterranean.

What immediate preparations followed the Directory's decision?
The Directory approved the expedition on March 5, 1798, granting Bonaparte command of the Armée d'Orient. Funding was secured partly by seizing the Swiss treasury, and troops and ships meant for England were quietly diverted to Mediterranean ports. By May, a fleet of about 300 vessels carrying 35,000–40,000 troops had assembled at Toulon. Departing on May 19, the force captured Malta en route and landed at Alexandria on July 1, accompanied by 167 scholars to underscore the mission's scientific and cultural aims.

What were the short-term outcomes and long-term impacts of the French occupation?
In the short term, the expedition failed militarily: Nelson's naval victory near Alexandria trapped the French army, which tried to break the British vise through a failed offensive into Palestine. Bonaparte return to France in 1799 to seize power, using his early victories, including the Battle of the Pyramids, to enhance his fame. The remaining French army in Egypt surrendered to the British in 1801. In the long term, the occupation weakened the Mamluks, enabled Muhammad Ali's rise, introduced modern military and scientific methods, and intensified Anglo-French rivalry.

How did Napoleon's invasion impact European imperial rivalries and perceptions of the Middle East?
Napoleon's 1798 invasion exposed the Ottoman Empire's military and administrative weakness, accelerating its internal decline and making its survival (the "Eastern Question") a pressing concern for European powers. While it was intended to weaken Britain, it introduced the British to Egypt, leading to their long-term interest and eventual occupation in 1882. The campaign also

revealed Europe's military and technological superiority to Middle Eastern rulers. This "double lesson"—that a small Western force could conquer, but only another could dislodge it—spurred reform efforts across the Ottoman Empire and encouraged deeper European political intervention.

Timeline

- **July 1797:** Before becoming Foreign Minister, Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand secretly urges French expansion to Egypt; later that month, he assumes the post.
- **August 1797:** Napoleon Bonaparte tells the Directory that seizing Egypt is key to undermining Britain.
- **January–February 1798:** Plans for invading Britain give way to an "Egyptian option." Talleyrand's February 14 report outlines strategic, economic, and geostrategic reasons for the expedition; Bonaparte supports postponing the England invasion.
- **March 5, 1798:** Directory resolves to invade Egypt under Bonaparte.
- **April–May 1798:** Bonaparte appointed General-in-Chief of the Army of the Orient; fleet of 300 vessels with 35,000–40,000 troops prepares at Toulon.
- **May 19, 1798:** French armada departs under strict secrecy; British misled about destination.
- **July 1, 1798:** French land in Egypt; Bonaparte proclaims friendship for Islam and liberation from Mamluks.
- **August 1798:** Admiral Nelson destroys French fleet at the Battle of the Nile, trapping Bonaparte's army.
- **Late 1799:** Bonaparte slips back to France and seizes power in the coup of 18 Brumaire.
- **1801:** Remaining French forces in Egypt surrender to Anglo-Ottoman forces, ending the expedition in defeat.

Considérations sur la guerre actuelle des Turcs (excerpt)
by Constantin François de Chassebœuf, comte de Volney (1788)
(Philosopher and Orientalist, author of *Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte*)

If, as has been said—or perhaps should have been said—the Emperor and Empress were to divide European Turkey between them,[1] there is only one prize that could adequately compensate France, one ambition truly worthy of her: the possession of Egypt.

Viewed from any angle, no other land can rival its advantages. Egypt boasts the most fertile soil in the world, the easiest to cultivate, and the most reliable harvests; unlike Morea and the island of Candia,[2] it does not rely on rains that may fail; unlike Cyprus, it has healthy air; and, unlike all three regions, it is not plagued by depopulation. In size, Egypt equals two-thirds of France, yet its wealth could exceed France's revenues two- or threefold. It offers the full range of Europe's and Asia's products—wheat, rice, cotton, flax, indigo, sugar, saffron, and more. With Egypt alone, France could afford to lose all her other colonies; it is practically at her doorstep, with only ten days needed for fleets to sail from Toulon to Alexandria. Poorly defended, it is both easy to take and to keep. And beyond these natural advantages, its possession would grant other benefits of no less importance.

Egypt would give us direct access to India; we could channel all Indian trade through the Red Sea, revive the ancient route via Suez, and make the Cape of Good Hope route obsolete. Caravans from Abyssinia[3] would bring us the wealth of Africa's interior—gold dust, ivory, gums, and slaves. Slaves alone would be a vast source of profit: on the Guinea coast they cost 800 livres apiece, but in Cairo only 150, allowing us to supply our islands in abundance.[4] By encouraging the pilgrimage to Mecca, we could control all trade from Barbary to Senegal, and our colony—or even France itself—would stand as the central trading hub of Europe and the world.

We must admit: this vision, without any exaggeration, is highly enticing—and one might almost fear that, in describing it, one's heart could be carried away. Yet prudence should guide even ambition, and before chasing the glitter of fortune, we should weigh both the obstacles in our path and the drawbacks that come with it.

These obstacles are both serious and many. First, to take Egypt, we would face three wars: one against the Turks—since their religion forbids the sultan from surrendering to infidels either the lands or the people of the faithful; another against the English—since it is unthinkable that this jealous nation would quietly watch us gain an advantage that could soon destroy their power in India; and finally, a war against the Egyptians themselves—a conflict that, while seemingly the least threatening, would in reality be the most dangerous of all.

There may be only eight to ten thousand Mamluks[6] in arms, but if Franks[5]—viewed there as enemies of God and the Prophet—were to land, Turks, Arabs, and peasants alike would rise against them. Fanaticism, as dangerous an enemy as any, would replace strategy and discipline; and in Egypt, it burns with full force. The very name "Frank" is despised, and only by depopulating the land could we establish ourselves.

Even if we suppose the Mamluks destroyed and the people subdued, that would be the smallest of our challenges. We would still have to govern a people whose language, morals, and customs we do not know—inviting constant misunderstandings and disorder. The two nations, different in every respect, would quickly grow to dislike each other: our soldiers would offend with their drunkenness and their disrespect toward women, a matter that alone could bring the gravest consequences. Even our officers would carry the light, dismissive, and scornful air that makes us so disliked abroad, alienating everyone they meet.

The result would be endless quarrels and uprisings: punishments would be dealt, resentment would grow, blood would be spilled, and we would repeat the tragedies of the Spaniards in America, the English in Bengal, the Dutch in the Moluccas, and the Russians in the Kuriles—driving the local population to ruin.[7] Our claims of gentleness and humanity would mean nothing; circumstances shape men, and in our neighbors' place, we would have been as barbarous as they. The strong are often harsh and cruel, and our own history proves our rule is no lighter than any other. Egypt would simply exchange one master for another, and we would conquer it only to destroy it.

And even then, we would face one last, relentless foe: the climate. History shows that hot lands are fatal to us—we could not hold Milan or Sicily, and our colonies in India and the West Indies consume our strength. What then could we expect of Egypt?

We would take with us our excesses and indulgence—drinking spirits, eating large amounts of meat, in short, trying to live exactly as we do in France. For one of our national traits is that, while fickle in tastes, we are stubbornly attached to our habits. Burning, malignant, and putrid fevers, pleurisy, and dysentery would kill us by the thousands; in an average year, a third of the army—8 to 10 thousand men—could be lost. And to hold Egypt, we would need at least 25 thousand men.

On top of the need to replenish our forces, add the waves of emigration for trade and agriculture, and imagine the depopulation this would cause at home. And all for what? To enrich a handful of men given commands through favoritism—men who would use their power only to amass scandalous fortunes, or who, even with the best intentions, could not carry out any stable, beneficial administration, since distrust and intrigue would constantly displace them.

Let no one claim that a "new system" would prevent abuses—history tells us otherwise. Since the reign of Francis I,[8] not a single one of our overseas ventures has truly succeeded: in Milan, Naples, Sicily, India, Madagascar, Cayenne, the Mississippi, Canada—everywhere we have failed. Even Saint-Domingue is not our own achievement; we owe it to the buccaneers.[9] Can anyone believe we will suddenly change our nature? We are lured by the promise of vast trade—but what are these riches, if they drain our population, increase our debts and taxes through new wars, and ultimately end up in the hands of only a few?

For the last century, commerce has been lavishly praised—but if we truly examined what it has brought to the real well-being of nations, our enthusiasm would be far more restrained. Ever since the discovery of the East and West Indies, bloody wars have been waged over commerce, and sword and fire have ravaged the globe for pepper, indigo, sugar, and coffee. Governments have told their peoples these were vital interests—but did the masses, who paid for them in blood, ever share in the enjoyment? More often, their burdens grew heavier, and their misery deepened. Worse still, the profits concentrated in a few hands have widened the gap between rich and poor, fraying or even breaking the bonds of society. In every country, one finds only a multitude of impoverished laborers and a small cluster of wealthy landowners.

With vast riches have come wastefulness, corrupted tastes, boldness, and license. The race for luxury throws families into disorder, and the pleasures of home life have faded. The urgent need for money has made the ways of obtaining it less honest, and old-fashioned integrity has vanished. The fine arts, now valued above all, have made the useful arts despised; the countryside has emptied into the cities, and farmers have left their ploughs to become servants or artisans. States may appear more splendid outwardly, but their true strength has withered. No European government can now emerge from a mere four or five years of war without exhaustion; all are weighed down with debt. Such are the fruits of conquest and commerce.

In chasing distant wealth, we neglect what we already have; in pursuing foreign ventures, we abandon domestic care. We gain land but lose people; we hire larger armies, maintain larger fleets, impose heavier taxes; farming grows costlier and declines. Urgent needs make the exercise of power more arbitrary; personal will replaces law; despotism takes root, and from that moment all vigor, industry, and strength decay. A fleeting, false brilliance is followed by lasting stagnation. Such are the examples Portugal, Spain, and Holland have given us—and such is the fate that awaits us if we do not learn from their lessons.

Notes

1. "Emperor and Empress … divide European Turkey." Contemporary shorthand for the late-18th-century "Greek Project," the notional partition of the Ottoman Balkans by Catherine II of Russia (the Empress) and Joseph II of Habsburg (the Holy Roman Emperor). "European Turkey" meant the Ottoman provinces in southeastern Europe.

2. Morea = the Peloponnese peninsula; Candia is the early modern European name for Crete, both

formerly Venetian, later Ottoman.

3. Abyssinia was the early modern term for the Ethiopian highlands; long-distance caravan trade linked the Red Sea and Nile routes.

4. Guinea coast / livres. “Guinea coast” denotes the West African littoral engaged in the Atlantic slave trade; the livre was pre-revolutionary French currency.

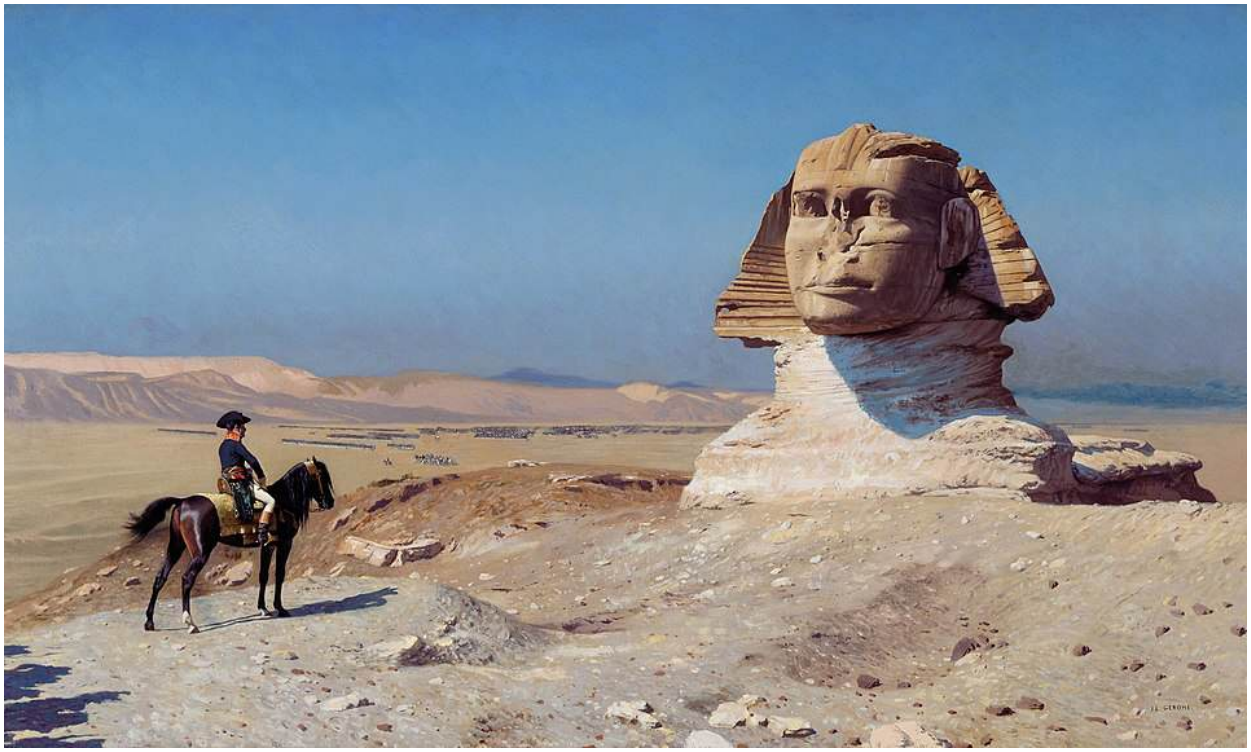
5. In Ottoman/Arabic usage, “Franks” (*al-Ifranj*) meant Western Europeans or Latin Christians—connoting the legacy of the Crusades.

6. Mamluks were a military-slave elite (largely of Caucasian origin) who dominated Egyptian politics under nominal Ottoman suzerainty in the 18th century.

7. Colonial analogies: Spaniards in America (conquest/forced labor regimes), English in Bengal (East India Company rule), Dutch in the Moluccas (spice-monopoly violence, e.g., Ambon), Russians in the Kuriles (expansion affecting Ainu communities).

8. Francis I, King of France, 1515–1547; his reign is a conventional starting point for early French overseas and Italian ventures.

9. Saint-Domingue was a French colony on western Hispaniola (later Haiti); 17th-century buccaneers were central to its early development.



Bonaparte Before the Sphinx by Jean-Léon Gérôme

REPORT TO THE DIRECTORY

by Charles-M. de Talleyrand[1]

(Minister of Foreign Affairs, 1797-1807)

February 14, 1798.

Egypt was once a province of the Roman Republic; it should now become a province of the French Republic.

The Roman conquest marked the beginning of beautiful Egypt's decline, whereas the French conquest will usher in its prosperity.

The Romans took Egypt from kings renowned for their contributions to the arts, sciences, and more; the French will seize it from some of the most dreadful tyrants in history. The former French monarchy had long aspired to this conquest, but it was too weak to pursue it.

Now, its realization falls to the Directory, as the crowning achievement of all the beauty, grandeur, and progress that the French Revolution has revealed to a world in awe.

Never before has the Directory been presented with a project so vast in scope and significance, yet so straightforward in its execution. I will now outline it and urge them to give me their full attention.

The Government of Egypt

In 1517, the Ottoman Sultan Selim II conquered Egypt from the Mamluks.[2] He granted them a highly favorable capitulation and also implemented reforms that stand as the highest testament to his talents and abilities as a conqueror.[3]

As part of this agreement, the Mamluks secured the right for twenty-three of their own to serve as beys, or military commanders. Selim also established a 24th beylik, which he placed under the authority of two Arab sheikhs.

From this system emerged the twenty-four beys who still govern Egypt today.

To counterbalance the despotic power of these beys, Selim appointed a pasha (viceroy or governor) for Egypt, granting him extensive authority. Not only were the militia corps (odgeaks) placed under his command, but he was also given authority over the beys themselves. However, Selim, realizing that his distance from Egypt would make it difficult to control a rebellious pasha, granted the beys, the militia corps, and the ulama (Islamic legal scholars) the power to

remove the pasha whenever they deemed his governance improper.[4]

This precaution, while intended as a safeguard, ultimately undermined the power of the sultans in Egypt.

The Mamluk beys took full advantage of this right of dismissal, using it as a way to reclaim some of the authority they had lost in battle. Indeed, pashas were frequently dismissed, and these removals were never challenged by the Grand Seigneur.[5] The beys would submit official complaints to Constantinople, detailing the real or alleged misconduct of the pasha, signed by themselves, militia officers, and leading ulama. Upon receiving these reports, the Grand Seigneur would promptly appoint a new pasha.

Sultan Selim also divided Egypt's land among the beys and the Mamluks, under the condition that, upon a landholder's death, the pasha would resell the land on behalf of the sultan and provide official ownership titles to the new buyers. This system was followed for some time, but it has long since fallen into disuse, with the beys now claiming full control over all land as they please.

Selim also established a taxation system in Egypt, ensuring that, after covering administrative costs, a fixed annual tribute of 1,200 purses—equivalent to 1,800,000 livres tournois—was sent to his treasury. This tribute was once delivered to Constantinople with great ceremony, but for a very long time, the Grand Seigneur has not received it.[6]

As long as the pasha retained real authority in Egypt, the beys and the militia corps remained united. However, once they had reduced the pasha to a mere figurehead, internal conflict arose. They fought over power for a long time, but ultimately, the beys emerged victorious and have ruled unchallenged for the past forty years. It was during this period that the oppression of the French in Egypt began, an issue I will soon describe in detail.

From this brief summary of Egypt's current political state, we can conclude that:

1. The Ottoman Porte does not even retain the semblance of authority there.
2. The pasha is effectively nothing more than the chief servant of the beys.
3. The Ottoman government receives no revenue from Egypt.
4. It has lost even its nominal sovereignty, as the beys control all of Egypt's lands for their own benefit.

French Grievances Against the Beys

This situation has been disastrous for Europeans engaged in trade with Egypt.

Among them, the French should have been the most respected by the beys. Yet, the opposite has been true: since 1760, when the notorious Aly Bey came to power, the French have suffered only mistreatment at their hands.[7]

Aly Bey frequently insulted France by humiliating its consuls. On two occasions, he even threatened to have the consul's dragoman subjected to the bastinado, a punishment normally reserved for Ottoman subjects (rayas).[8]

He forced French merchants to provide goods at ruinous prices, borrowed large sums from them without repayment, and extorted valuable gifts by force. Finally, he inflicted a massive financial blow by refusing to pay for an entire year's worth of supplies, amounting to over 300,000 francs.

His successors, Khalil Bey and Mohamed Bey, were somewhat less oppressive, yet their abuses were still severe.

However, the most disastrous period for the French has been the reign of Mourad Bey and Ibrahim Bey, who currently rule—or rather, oppress—Egypt. There is no form of abuse or extortion that they have not inflicted upon the French. These two tyrants were expelled in 1786 by the Ottoman admiral (Capitan Pasha), whom the Ottoman government sent to Egypt.[9] They were replaced by Ismael Bey, under whom the French experienced some respite—though only at the cost of significant financial sacrifices. However, after his death in 1791, Mourad Bey and Ibrahim Bey returned to Cairo and resumed their plundering.

It seems that the French Revolution has only intensified their fury against the French. It is certain that their actions since that time have exceeded anything previously imagined. Indeed, all correspondence from Egypt in recent years confirms that agents from England, the Empire, Venice, and other powers were inciting the beys' tyranny against our compatriots.

This alone can explain the countless curses the beys have hurled against us and our government on numerous occasions. They have sought to humiliate our nationals at every opportunity. In 1793—a particularly significant year—they even had the audacity to arrest three Frenchmen, including Réal, whom they believed to be the brother of the patriot Réal, whom they mistakenly thought was a member of the infamous National Convention. This was the term they used to refer to that assembly.[10]

These vile tyrants are emboldened only by their audacity, which has grown considerably due to the restraint that circumstances have forced upon us. But the hour of their punishment is near; the Directory can no longer delay it. National dignity, so brazenly insulted, demands the most resounding vengeance—even if it were not also a matter of recovering the vast sums they have

stolen from our merchants.

By avenging the wrongs done to the Republic, the Directory will also free the people of Egypt from the oppressive yoke under which they suffer. It is impossible to fully grasp the extent of the atrocious tyranny that crushes them.

The fate of the peasant is the most miserable on earth. After an entire year of labor, his only reward is corn bread, a single blue shirt, and a mud hut devoid of furniture. The slightest mistake is punished with a beating. The people loathe their tyrants, but they lack the strength to overthrow them. They will bless the French for liberating them.

Negotiations and half-measures are entirely inadequate. Our envoys in Constantinople have repeatedly petitioned the Porte for orders, but these have either been denied or proven ineffective. In Year III, Citizen Verninac sent an agent to Cairo, who entered into negotiations with the beys and reached an agreement with them for the repayment of part of the sums they owed. However, this agreement had no effect, and just a few months later, the beys committed new outrages against the French.[11]

Thus, the Directory must resort to armed force. Only this measure will compel the beys to show the respect due to the French Republic.

Before examining the means of execution, I must briefly present to the Directory the resources of Egypt and its commerce.

Situated between the 30th and 20th degrees of north latitude, Egypt enjoys the advantages of some of the most fortunate climates on the globe. It yields both the most precious products of Africa and those of Europe and America. Grains and vegetables are abundant. It produces the finest rice in the world. Flax and cotton are plentiful. Safflower, used in dyes, is found only in this region. Its sugar is of high quality. Indigo, with better cultivation, could thrive magnificently. Coffee would easily adapt to Egyptian soil. Silkworms could yield superb silk if mulberry plantations were encouraged.

By its geographical position, Egypt appears to be the natural center of trade for three of the four continents. As part of Africa, it receives caravans of Black Africans bringing gum arabic, elephant tusks, ostrich feathers, and gold dust.

It trades with all the northern African nations, from Morocco to Derna; with Europe, being only 600 leagues from the ports of France, Spain, and Italy; with Turkey and the Greek Archipelago; and with Syria, to which it is adjacent. The Red Sea provides an easy route to Jeddah, Yemen, and India.

It is painful to think that such immense resources and potential wealth remain untapped, while the people of this land live in the most miserable conditions on earth.

But if Egypt were governed wisely and enlightened leadership were established, a profound transformation would soon take place.

It is impossible to fully estimate the immense benefits that the Great Nation would derive from this land. By securing property rights for farmers, the population would grow, and agricultural and industrial production would increase significantly. Merchants, assured that their businesses would not be disrupted and that they could enjoy the fruits of their labor in peace and security, would eagerly establish themselves in this naturally blessed land.

Indian trade would inevitably abandon the long and costly route around the Cape of Good Hope in favor of the Suez route. Customs duties collected at Egypt's entry points and land taxes would generate considerable annual revenue for the Republic, not to mention the much greater sums that could be raised from the sale of land to the inhabitants—since, at present, no one in Egypt owns land. The land belongs to the government.

This event would bring about a revolution in European commerce, striking a major blow against England. It would destroy its power in India—the very foundation of its dominance in Europe. The reopening of the Suez route would have as devastating an effect on England as the discovery of the Cape of Good Hope had on the Genoese and Venetians in the 16th century.

The outcome of this commercial shift would be entirely in favor of the Republic, as it is the one power best positioned—geographically, demographically, and through the ingenuity and industriousness of its people—to reap the greatest benefits.

Let us never forget that every ancient and modern nation that controlled Indian trade reached the highest levels of wealth and prosperity.

Once the French Republic controls Cairo, and consequently Suez, it will no longer matter who holds the Cape of Good Hope. If necessary, France could even offer it as a bargaining chip in a peace treaty with England.

We must also keep in mind that, sooner or later, the nations of Europe will lose their western [hemisphere] colonies. The possession of Egypt will be more than enough to compensate the Republic for such a loss.

Objections and Concerns

Many objections may be raised against this plan of invasion. Some may argue that attacking

Ottoman territories is unjust toward the Sublime Porte; others may point to the potential loss of our Levant trade or the possibility of war with the Grand Seigneur or conflicts with various European powers he might incite against us.

I will now address these objections and reassure the Directory, should they have caused any concern.

If there is any injustice in our invasion of Egypt, the blame lies with the Porte itself, which for five years has allowed our people to be oppressed, harassed, plundered, and humiliated in all its territories without providing the reparations required by international law and our treaties.

Does the Porte believe that the Directory is unaware that it tolerated the English seizing one of our frigates in the port of Mykonos without consequence? Does it think we are ignorant of the way Djezzar Pasha mistreated and extorted our compatriots in Syria?[12] Or of the insolence with which the Egyptian beys have treated us?

But even if the Porte assumed that the Directory knew nothing of these incidents or the open violations of our treaties throughout the Ottoman Empire, could it believe we have forgotten the appalling and disastrous event that occurred in Smyrna on the 25th of Ventôse, Year V (March 15, 1797), when all the property of our citizens was burned or looted?[13] Since that time, these unfortunate people have been left in utter destitution.

Not only did the Porte refuse the rightful indemnities requested by our ambassador, but the perpetrators of these heinous crimes have gone unpunished.

To top off our list of grievances, on the 12th of Frimaire (December 2, 1797), a sailor from the frigate *La Brune*, stationed in Smyrna, was murdered in broad daylight on the street by a Turk. Neither the local judge (cadi) nor the religious authority (mollah) even attempted to apprehend the assassin.[14]

After such repeated offenses, how could anyone accuse the French government of acting unjustly? Has its patience not been tested enough? Any further delay in delivering rightful retribution would be seen as a sign of weakness. It is now imperative to secure the justice that has long been denied to us.

The potential loss of our trade in the Levant should not weigh too heavily on the Directory's decision. That trade is already nearly lost, even in times of peace. Foreign nations have taken advantage of our forced absence to establish their own textile and manufacturing industries, significantly weakening ours. However, if we bring prosperity to Egypt, its people will become major consumers, allowing us to recover in this new market what we might lose in Turkey.

As for the possibility of war with the Ottoman Empire, I can confidently say that such a conflict would be disastrous for the Porte itself. It is unlikely to take that risk.

The Ottomans rule over Morea, Macedonia, and Albania—regions where their authority is fragile and unrest is already growing. Their leaders will recognize that the very moment war is declared, these three provinces will be lost, as we will arm the Greeks and support their liberation.

That said, I do not suggest breaking relations with the Porte entirely. On the contrary, I believe that our invasion of Egypt should be accompanied by the appointment of a skilled and determined negotiator to Constantinople. This diplomat should be well-equipped with carefully crafted instructions tailored to the situation. I do not foresee these negotiations failing. I have concrete strategies to ensure success, which I will present to the Directory at the right moment.

Nor am I particularly concerned about the possibility that the Porte might incite European powers into war against us.

England does not intimidate us. France's ongoing war with England creates the perfect opportunity for an invasion of Egypt. England, preoccupied with defending its own islands from an impending French assault, will not weaken its coastal defenses to interfere with our plans—especially since our project must remain a closely guarded secret.

Russia, Prussia, and Austria—having themselves divided and occupied Poland—are unlikely to take a moral stand against us in this matter. Furthermore, Russia does not pose a significant threat to us; Prussia has no real interest in who controls Egypt; and Austria is too occupied with its affairs in Germany and its newly acquired territories along the Adriatic to engage in another war so soon.

What should reassure us most, however, is the continued spread of revolutionary ideals throughout Europe. The tide of liberty is rising, and I believe it will soon reshape the entire continent. Monarchs will be reluctant to hasten this process by provoking a war with France.

The Directory, therefore, should not expect serious opposition from external powers in securing Egypt. But will there be resistance within Egypt itself? Let us examine this question.

Military Situation in Egypt

The people of Egypt despise the beys, who have long oppressed them. They are unarmed, but if given weapons, they would gladly rebel against their rulers.

As for the beys and their Mamluk forces, their resistance will not be difficult to overcome. Their army consists of only 7,000 to 8,000 cavalrymen—superbly mounted and well-armed, but

completely unfamiliar with French military tactics.

Moreover, their forces fight in a chaotic and undisciplined manner. Their artillery is poorly trained and largely ineffective. Their usual strategy is to fire a single volley at the start of battle, after which their untrained gunners frequently miss their targets.

According to those most knowledgeable about Egypt, I can confidently assert that its conquest would require minimal French casualties.

Plan of Action

To achieve this, both a naval fleet and a land army are required.

The best staging ground for assembling these forces would be the former Venetian islands.[15]

If the objective were merely to invade, plunder, and then withdraw, an army of 12,000 to 15,000 men would suffice. However, to take and permanently hold Egypt, a force of 20,000 to 25,000 soldiers would be necessary.

This army could be transported aboard ships readily available in Marseille, Toulon, Corfu, Cephalonia, Zante, and other ports.

A naval escort of five ships of the line and six frigates would be more than sufficient to protect the transport ships and ensure a safe landing at Alexandria, where no resistance is expected. The city has only one fort, which could be neutralized within ten minutes by a single frigate. There are no soldiers capable of mounting a defense.

The army's departure must be scheduled without delay for the 25th of Prairial (June 13, 1798). Seasonal trade winds would carry the fleet to Alexandria within twelve to fifteen days, and there is never an outbreak of plague there at this time of year.

Alongside the main warships and transport vessels, it would be advisable to include galleys, half-galleys, and gunboats. These could ascend the Nile, scattering any forces the beys might attempt to deploy along the riverbanks.

To ensure a swift victory while sparing French lives, it is crucial to overwhelm the beys with superior artillery.

Since the plague does not originate in Alexandria or elsewhere in Egypt, it will be easy to prevent any health risks by setting up a quarantine station on the narrow land strip separating Alexandria's two harbors.

The army would only stay in Alexandria for a brief period.

Before the beys could react, a strong detachment would immediately advance to Rosetta, securing control of the Nile's mouth and ensuring a smooth and uninterrupted passage of troops and supplies toward Cairo.[16] Once all forces are gathered in Rosetta, the advance toward Cairo would begin immediately. Part of the army would travel overland along the Nile, while the rest would move by boat, supported by artillery. The journey to Cairo would take just five to six days.

The beys may attempt to engage us in battle near Cairo—an outcome that would work in our favor, as victory would be assured. They will then try to escape into Upper Egypt, but we must pursue them without hesitation.

They are likely to retreat as far as Aswan (Syene). At that point, all of Upper Egypt will be under our control. It will be important to transport the region's goods and supplies downriver to help cover the costs of transport ships, which will return loaded with provisions for southern France, Corfu, Zante, Cephalonia, and other territories. Egypt has rarely had as plentiful a harvest as it does this year.

For this reason, the army and navy will only need to carry thirty days' worth of provisions—by the time they reach Cairo, they will have access to abundant supplies.

While the main army pursues the fleeing beys, a garrison of 5,000 to 6,000 men will remain in Cairo to maintain order. This force will be more than sufficient, as the Mamluks will have been entirely driven out of the city.

To secure Egypt permanently, some key military fortifications will be necessary. First, a small fort should be built in Aswan to contain the beys, the Mamluks, and potential Arab raiders, preventing any future incursions. Another, larger fort will be needed in Salahiyah, which is located at the entrance to the Gaza Desert—the only viable route through which enemy forces could attempt an invasion from Syria.[17]

In addition, Alexandria and the mouth of the Nile at Rosetta must be fortified. A small fortress should also be constructed at Beqayr (a port between Rosetta and Alexandria) and at Damietta, near the Nile's estuary on the inland side.[18]

To complete these projects, the army must be accompanied by skilled military engineers, as well as civilian engineers for the construction of bridges and roads.

The success of this expedition is guaranteed. The costs will not be significant, but even if they

were substantial, the mission should still be undertaken—both for its strategic importance and because its expenses will be quickly and fully recovered.

Additionally, this expedition provides us with the opportunity to establish a military force of 15,000 men in Suez.

If this second phase of the plan is approved, then the army landing at Alexandria should be increased from 20,000–25,000 men to 35,000 men.

The British control a vast expanse of territory in India, yet they defend it with only 15,000 to 20,000 soldiers. Their primary forces consist of sepoy regiments, whose loyalty is uncertain—especially if we succeed in uniting 15,000 French troops with Tipu Sahib's army.[19]

Suez provides the ideal launch point for such an operation. To ensure a smooth and secure embarkation, it would have been preferable to send a fleet and transport ships to Suez ahead of time, either from Europe or from the French colonies of Île de France (Mauritius) and Réunion.[20] However, since time does not allow for this, we could instead utilize the ships that routinely transport coffee from Yemen and Jeddah to Suez.

These ships typically arrive in early June, numbering around fifty to sixty vessels of varying sizes. They would be sufficient to transport 15,000 troops along with their arms and supplies.

Although these vessels are inferior to European ships, they could still serve in an urgent situation. From July to August 10, the monsoon winds are highly favorable for reaching India. European ships could reach the Malabar coast in thirty-five days, while the local vessels would take approximately ten days longer.

If this plan were approved, we would need to add 200 experienced sailors—captains and navigators equipped with proper charts and compasses—since we cannot depend on the navigational skills of the Arab shipmasters.

If kept secret, the operation could be carried out swiftly enough that the English would have no time to interfere. If they only discovered our intentions as our troops were already departing from French ports, we would reach India well before they could deploy reinforcements. While it would take the British six months to send forces to India, we would arrive in less than four.

I must caution the Directory that if it decides to delay the India expedition until next year for more thorough planning, the mission will become far more difficult. As soon as the British learn that Egypt is under our control, they will take immediate precautions by reinforcing their military presence in India.

This plan may seem ambitious, but I have consulted a man with the deepest knowledge of Egypt—someone whom fate seems to have preserved for the benefit of the Republic. He believes that this is one of the most effective strategies to accelerate the downfall of the enemies who continue to resist us.

This expedition is not about conquering India. Our goal is to drive out the British, establish French dominance, and support allied local rulers.

I will not attempt to enumerate all the immense benefits that the success of this mission would bring to France. The Directory is well aware of them and understands their incalculable value.

General Considerations

Returning to the main expedition—the conquest of Egypt—it should be led by a commission of two or three individuals who are prudent, decisive, and, if possible, knowledgeable about the region. This commission should be granted full authority.

The military commanders themselves do not need extraordinary strategic skills, as the enemy they will face offers little opportunity for distinguished combat. They will need wisdom more than military brilliance.

Most importantly, they must ensure that French troops respect the customs of this largely uneducated population. The two most sensitive issues that must be handled with the utmost care are religion and women. Any reckless behavior regarding these matters could have disastrous consequences.

The people will welcome us enthusiastically; they have long yearned for liberation from their oppressors. We must ensure they do not feel as though they have simply exchanged one set of rulers for another.

The ulémas (Islamic legal scholars) hold significant influence over the population. We must work to gain their support and allow them to retain a certain level of prestige, at least in appearance.

As education spreads, the people will eventually begin to assess the ulémas more critically, at which point their power will decline. Until then, we must handle them with care.

The Copts, Egypt's native Christian community, are the only ones involved in tax collection and public finances.[21] It will be important to secure their cooperation, which should not be difficult. Through them, we can accurately survey village lands and set fair sale prices—low enough to encourage ownership but high enough to benefit the Republic financially.

I could add many more details to this report, drawing from Egyptian correspondence and the insights of Citizen Magallon, the consul general in Cairo, who spent thirty-six years in Egypt and is currently in Paris.[22] However, these details are unnecessary.

This report is already comprehensive, and I believe I have demonstrated:

1. That the conquest of Egypt is a legitimate response to the Ottoman government's mistreatment of France and the many insults we have suffered.

2. That the operation will be both straightforward and certain to succeed.

3. That it will require only a moderate financial investment, which the Republic will quickly recoup.

4. Finally, that it offers immense strategic and economic benefits to the Republic.

I therefore request that the Directory communicate its decision to me as soon as possible. The decision must be made quickly to take advantage of the approaching favorable season. I believe there is no need to stress the importance of secrecy.

Once the Directory has reached its resolution, I will submit a formal decree for its approval.

Ch.-Mau. TALLEYRAND.

Notes

1. Talleyrand become minister of foreign affairs later in February. The Directory (*Directoire*) was the five-man executive that governed France from 1795 to 1799, between the Terror and Bonaparte's coup of 18 Brumaire. Talleyrand's report closely replicates many of the arguments made in a policy paper by Charles Magallon, a merchant and former French consul in Egypt, written five days earlier.

2. Selim I, not Selim II. The conqueror of Egypt in 1517 was Selim I ("Yavuz"), not Selim II—an error in the text.

3. Capitulation is here used for settlement terms granted to the conquered Mamluk elite; in Ottoman diplomacy "capitulations" more often meant privileges negotiated with foreign powers.

4. *Ulama* = Islamic scholars/jurists; odjak/ocak (here "odgeaks") = the local Janissary garrison/corps in Egypt; both figured in provincial power-sharing under Ottoman rule.

5. "Grand Seigneur" is a period synonym for the Ottoman sultan; the "(Sublime) Porte" refers to the central Ottoman government at Constantinople.

6. An Ottoman purse (*kese*) was a bulk sum of silver coin (piastres/kuruş). The livre tournois was pre-revolutionary French currency; the stated equivalence is approximate.

7. Ali Bey al-Kabir (r. 1760s–1772) was a powerful Mamluk who briefly broke with the Ottomans.

8. Bastinado = beating the soles of the feet; reaya = Ottoman subjects (often non-Muslim non-military taxpayers).

9. The Ottoman grand admiral—Kapudan Paşa—led the 1786 intervention that expelled Murad and Ibrahim; they later returned to power.

10. "Réal." Likely Étienne (E.-J.-J.-A.) Réal (1768–1837), a prominent revolutionary official later tied to the police ministry; the beys appear to have mistaken an unrelated Frenchman for a relative of a Paris "patriot."

11. "Citizen Verninac" is the French envoy at Constantinople (Raymond de Verninac Saint-Maur). "Year III" is the French Republican calendar (1794–95).

12. Djezzar Pasha is Ahmad al-Jazzar, Ottoman governor of Acre ("the Butcher"), notorious for harsh rule in Syria/Palestine.

13. "25 Ventôse, Year V" = March 15, 1797; the text refers to anti-French (and anti-foreign) violence and losses at Smyrna/Izmir.

14. Cadi = Islamic judge; molla/mullah = learned jurist/clergy.

15. "Former Venetian islands" were the Ionian Islands (Corfu, Cephalonia, Zante/Zakynthos, etc.), ceded to France by the Treaty of Campo Formio (1797).

16. Rosetta (Rashid) stands at a Nile mouth; holding it controlled river access toward Cairo.

17. Salahiyah, or Al-Ṣāliḥiyya ash-Sharqiyya, lies on the desert route toward Sinai/Gaza—the land corridor from Syria.

18. Beqayr is Aboukir (Abū Qīr) Bay, between Rosetta and Alexandria—later the site of Nelson's 1798 naval victory.

19. Tipu Sahib is Tipu Sultan of Mysore (r. 1782–1799), Britain's chief adversary in southern India; the memo imagines Franco-Mysorean coordination.

20. Île de France and Réunion were French Indian Ocean colonies. Île de France = Mauritius; Réunion retained its name.

21. Copts are Egypt's indigenous Christian community; in the late Ottoman period many served as fiscal clerks and tax-farm managers.

22. Charles Magallon, long-serving French consul-general at Cairo, whose own memo served as a draft for Talleyrand's, is cited here as an experienced informant.

Mémoires de La Revellière-Lépeaux (excerpt)
by Louis-Marie de La Révellière-Lépeaux
(Member of the Directory, 1795-1799)

When Bonaparte came back from Italy to France, he always maintained proper decorum with the Directory.[1] His own clothing was notably simple, though his aides-de-camp were lavishly adorned with gold and embroidery.[2] I'm not sure what tone or manner of speech he used with my colleagues, but with me he often spoke in praise of domestic virtues. He said his favorite book was Plutarch's *Lives of Illustrious Men.*[3] I suspect that with some of the others, his conversations were a little different.

This is a good moment to speak about one of history's most famous ventures—the Egyptian expedition. I will share only lesser-known details, ones that may still help future generations form a clearer judgment of it.

Let me state clearly that every part of the Egyptian expedition—whether admirable in its grandeur or questionable in its recklessness—was entirely Bonaparte's doing, both in conception and in execution. The Directory never had the idea, nor did any of its members. This makes it false, as Bonaparte later told O'Meara,[4] that the plan was jointly his and the Directory's. If my memory serves me right, it was Monge who first mentioned the idea publicly, speaking on Bonaparte's behalf during the session where he and Berthier[5] presented the Treaty of Campo Formio to the Directory.[6] Bonaparte had kept the idea quiet before that, knowing the Clichy faction would seize on it to attack him and try to block it.[7] Thus, the accusations made against the Directory regarding this celebrated venture are nothing but baseless inventions fueled by malice.

Some have said we forced Bonaparte into the expedition to get rid of the threat he posed to us. Others claimed we wanted to exile not just him, but also the forty thousand soldiers under his command, along with all the generals who went with him—men the Directory supposedly feared and wanted gone. And that's not all—rumors reached absurd extremes. One English book even asserted that the Directory's only aim was to have most of France's scholars killed during the expedition, just to get them out of the way![8]

But who actually gave Bonaparte the idea for such a hazardous venture? Did it come from him alone? And what drove him to pursue it? Only he could answer these questions with certainty. I believe, though, that if his career at the time hadn't already pulled him away from the Directory for such a long stretch, he might not have considered leaving France at all. Still, his ambition and pride couldn't stand the idea of either fading from the public eye or taking a position that—no matter how prestigious—would leave him under the Directory's orders. His ego was already chafing at having to deal with five men under whose authority he had once commanded armies,

and to whom he owed both the chance and the means of winning such a dazzling reputation in the world.

A seat in one of the legislative councils would never have satisfied his ambition.[9] In such a large assembly, he would have been swallowed up, his fame not so much dimmed as simply forgotten—at least for a time. For all his talkativeness, sometimes verging on chatter, he lacked any real gift for public speaking.

Another reason for wanting to leave was his deep fear of political factions—no one feared them more than he did. He knew well that the Treaty of Campo Formio and his political actions in Italy had been sharply criticized by many, and these critics didn't plan to confine themselves to private grumbling; they were getting ready to attack him openly in the press. On coming back from Italy, it was as if, to use the saying, the ground was burning beneath his feet.

Once he'd decided to leave France, it's easy to see how his daring nature and grand imagination would have led him to dream up the Egyptian expedition. He could carry the glory of his arms to a land forever linked with the names of Sesostris, Alexander, and Rome's greatest leaders;[10] restore civilization, the arts, literature, and science to a place that had once gifted them to Europe but had since fallen into misery and barbarism; found a powerful colony capable of growing all the riches of the tropics; open direct trade with India and break British dominance there.[11] What could be grander or more dazzling than such schemes? And who can say whether, already burning with the hunger to rule, he didn't imagine an even wider destiny—after securing Egypt, to march into Syria, rally its people against the Turks, bring them under his flag, sweep through Asia Minor as a liberator, reach in triumph the capital of the old continent, drive the descendants of Muhammad from Constantinople, and take the throne of Constantine?[12] To his ambitious daring, none of this would have seemed impossible. His later actions prove that such dreams and hopes were not out of character. I clearly recall that, when speaking with us about the expedition, he made it plain he considered all these projects achievable.

It's worth noting, however, that he never spoke of taking a throne in either of those countries. If you believed his words, the freedom of peoples and the pursuit of glory were the only motives driving his actions and the ultimate aim of all his ambitions.

Be that as it may, the Egyptian expedition promised, in theory, the greatest benefits—for France's glory and interests, and even for humanity as a whole. Every true Frenchman, every friend of mankind, should have wished for its success—and no one wanted it more than I did. Yet I still felt duty-bound to oppose the plan. The odds, to my mind, were entirely against a favorable outcome. The British had a fleet in the Mediterranean and enough spies to track our every move, so it was only by sheer luck—which no one could reasonably count on—that we avoided detection. The French ships were packed to the masts with baggage, weapons, and provisions, and the troops were crammed in as tightly as possible.

The crews and officers, most of them inexperienced, wouldn't even have had enough space to maneuver. And if the French and British fleets had met, France would have lost, in a single blow, the remainder of her warships, her best sailors, thirty-eight or forty thousand of her finest troops, most of her top generals, and a massive stock of equipment. We now know just how narrowly Nelson's fleet missed intercepting ours.[13] But even if that meeting hadn't happened—as, against all odds, it didn't—how could we possibly hold Egypt without communication with France, without a way to replace soldiers in an army constantly weakened by many factors? The British, controlling the seas, could cut off our supply convoys, even our dispatch boats, leaving us with no assistance and effectively locking us in, while they had full freedom to land armies wherever they pleased. And despite the fine-sounding justifications offered to make the Turks view the venture favorably, it was hard to believe the Ottoman Porte—pressed by London, Vienna, and St. Petersburg—wouldn't declare war on us.[14] Had Austria really made peace in good faith? Could we trust that she wouldn't break her treaty with France once she saw us bogged down in such an operation, deprived of so fine an army as the one being sent there? Events later proved that our doubts about her good faith were entirely justified.[15]

I honestly don't know what to think, but I'm inclined to believe Bonaparte was well aware of Austria's future intentions. He was eager to set off and quick to excuse the insults to the French legation in Vienna—which he claimed were caused only by the imprudence of our ambassador, Bernadotte.[16] He took pains to reassure the Directory about the Austrian cabinet's future plans, refused to preside over the French legation at the Congress of Rastatt[17] to finalize the already nearly completed peace with the Empire, and behaved in several other ways that, while not outright proof, make my suspicion quite plausible. After all, what has he not later shown himself capable of?

When the Directory discussed the Egyptian expedition with him, some of my colleagues and I raised the objections I've already described. He had a ready answer for everything. Still, I held firm in my belief that we should not risk such a dangerous gamble. But the majority let themselves be persuaded by the general's confidence in total success and by the dazzling rewards that were promised. The decision was made—the expedition would go ahead.

Here's a small anecdote about this, told in different ways: One day, seeing that I kept raising objections in the council against the expedition, Bonaparte said impatiently that he asked the Directory to give it to another general. "You're free," I replied at once, "to resign if you wish—and in that case, I think we should accept. As you can see, I'm far from insisting that the expedition must happen; but if it does, it ought to be led by the man who conceived it, who pushed for it, and who surely calculated its means and consequences. He should receive the credit for its success—or the blame if it fails." Bonaparte fell silent and never mentioned resigning again. In truth, the choice was either to abandon the project—which would have been far better—or put him in charge of it. If someone else had led it, I have no doubt he would have

sown seeds of discord and disintegration among the ranks, as he had done before—and as his brothers kept doing in Italy after the Treaty of Campo Formio—so that no later achievement could rival his own, and so that any setbacks would only make his past victories shine brighter.

Once the Directory made its decision, it gave Bonaparte full freedom to prepare the expedition's resources. To avoid the rivalries so common in distant campaigns—especially between army and navy commanders—he was given supreme authority over the fleet, the army, and all the administrative functions. Even the admiral was placed under his command.[18] We saw these arrangements as essential for success. After all, how could the government, from such a distance and with such poor communication, settle disputes and keep the necessary unity?

All this shows that the loss of our fleet at Aboukir was due either to Bonaparte's faulty planning or to his neglect in ordering it into Alexandria's harbor. The admiral was not the sort to disobey a direct order—but after his death, he could no longer dispute Bonaparte's later claim that he had in fact given such an order.[19]

It's worth noting that the attack on Malta was not ordered by the Directory, which knew nothing about it. Bonaparte had planned it in Italy with several knights. To me, it was just another example of the general's lucky boldness. Many things could have gone wrong, delaying the fleet and bringing it face to face with the enemy squadron—which is exactly what would have happened if Malta had resisted only two or three days longer,[20] as was perfectly reasonable to expect.

Once the expedition was underway, we had virtually no direct contact with the army, apart from what we heard when Louis Bonaparte returned to Italy and France. He spoke about matters only in vague terms.[21]

Notes

1. The "Directory" (*Directoire*) was the five-man executive that governed France from 1795 to 1799, between the Terror and Bonaparte's coup of 18 Brumaire.

2. *Aides-de-camp* were senior staff officers attached to a general for operations and liaison; their ornate uniforms signaled status.

3. Plutarch's *Lives* (*Parallel Lives*) were classical biographies of Greek and Roman figures, widely read in Enlightenment Europe and often cited by Bonaparte.

4. Barry Edward O'Meara was Napoleon's Irish surgeon on St. Helena; his 1822 book reported conversations with the exiled emperor.

5. Gaspard Monge, mathematician and former minister, was a close ally who later accompanied the expedition; Louis-Alexandre Berthier was Bonaparte's chief of staff and future marshal.

6. The Treaty of Campo Formio (October 17, 1797) ended war between France and Austria, ceding Lombardy and recognizing French gains.

7. The "Clichy" faction was a royalist-leaning opposition circle in the Council of Five Hundred, named after its Paris meeting place, hostile to Bonaparte.

8. The expedition included a corps of *savants*—about 150 scientists, engineers, and artists—who founded the Institut d'Égypte; the claim that the Directory meant to have them killed was polemical.

9. Under the Constitution of Year III, legislation was divided between the Council of Five Hundred (lower house) and the Council of Ancients (upper house).

10. "Sesostris" is the classical name for a legendary Egyptian conqueror, often identified with Ramesses II or Senusret III; Alexander is Alexander the Great.

11. Strategically, the project aimed at the Red Sea/overland route to India; French engineers even surveyed the Suez isthmus in 1799.

12. "Turks" here means the Ottoman Empire; "descendants of Muhammad" is rhetorical—Ottoman sultans claimed the caliphate, not genealogical descent; "throne of Constantine" refers to the Byzantine imperial seat at Constantinople (Istanbul).

13. Rear-Admiral Horatio Nelson hunted the convoy in June–July 1798, twice missing it by days; weeks later he destroyed the French fleet at Aboukir Bay.

14. The "Ottoman Porte" (Sublime Porte) was the central government at Constantinople; London, Vienna, and St. Petersburg stand for Britain, Austria, and Russia.

15. Austria re-entered war against France in the Second Coalition (1798–1801), soon after the Egyptian expedition sailed.

16. General Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte, later king of Sweden, was French ambassador in Vienna in 1798; a tricolor display at the embassy sparked riots and a diplomatic breach.

17. The Congress of Rastatt (1797–1799) was meant to settle peace terms between France and the Holy Roman Empire; it ended in crisis when French envoys were attacked and killed by Austrian troops.

18. This unusual arrangement subordinated the navy to the general; Admiral François-Paul Brueys d'Aigalliers commanded the fleet under Bonaparte.

19. The Battle of the Nile (Aboukir Bay), August 1–2, 1798, saw Nelson annihilate the French fleet; Brueys was killed. Whether the ships could or should have entered Alexandria's shallow harbor remains debated.

20. Malta, ruled by the Knights Hospitaller (Order of St. John), fell to Bonaparte in June 1798 after brief resistance; Nelson was sweeping the Mediterranean at the time, so any delay risked interception.

21. Louis Bonaparte (1778–1846), Napoleon's younger brother and aide-de-camp—later king of Holland—left the expedition early and carried back reports.

Napoleon in Egypt by Jean-Léon Gérôme