

We are all Levantines now

The Levant, with its eastern Mediterranean trading cities that flourished thanks to the Franco-Ottoman alliance, was an economic and diplomatic experiment that pioneered a way of life all the world now understands

BY PHILIP MANSEL

The Levant means “where the sun rises”: the eastern Mediterranean. Levant is a geographical word, free of associations with race or religion, defined not by nationality but by the sea. The great Levantine cities of Smyrna, Alexandria and Beirut were windows on the world, ports more open and cosmopolitan than inland cities like Ankara, Damascus and Cairo. From the beginning Levantine cities were international. They shared defining characteristics: geography, diplomacy, language, hybridity, trade, pleasure, modernity and vulnerability. All are present in today’s global cities.

Take diplomacy. The Levant is a dialogue – at the heart of what Gibbon called “the world’s debate” between Christianity and Islam. In the Levant dialogue trumped conflict, deals came before ideals. The modern Levant was a product of one of the most successful alliances in history, for three and a half centuries after 1535, between France and the Ottoman empire, between the Caliph of the Muslims and the Most Christian King. It was based on the shared hostility of the two monarchies to Spain and the House of Austria, but soon acquired commercial and cultural momentum. Frenchmen called the Levant “our Indies”. Provence lived off the Levant trade.

With the alliance came the capitulations: agreements between the Ottoman and foreign governments which allowed foreigners to live and trade in the Ottoman empire, for the most part under their own legal systems. As a result of the French-Ottoman alliance, French consuls were appointed to most Levantine cities. The Levant was a very near East where, thanks to Ottoman law and order, travel was relatively safe. These were the years of the consuls, and the ports of the Levant became diarchies between foreign consuls and local officials. Many locals preferred to use the consuls’ law courts since they were less corrupt. In 1694 and 1770, consuls in Smyrna (today’s Izmir) persuaded the commanders of the Venetian and Russian navies not to attack the city, to prevent reprisals by Muslims against local Christians.

Consuls acted both as servants of their own government and as local powerbrokers and transmitters of technology and information. In the *danse macabre* of seduction and exploitation which has lasted to this day, outside interference was matched by local desire for more of it. In Beirut the al-Khazen family – still prominent in Lebanese politics – used their position as French consuls or vice-consuls in the late 17th and 18th centuries to strengthen their own powerbase – and to urge the king of France to “liberate” the area. In the 19th century the British consul in Beirut was visited by members of the Jumblatt dynasty (still hereditary leaders of the Druze community), asking Britain to rule Lebanon “like India”. The Iranian consul in Beirut was a protector of the local Shia long before the Iranian revolution of 1978.

Consuls were equivalents of international organisations like Unesco, the IMF or Nato – annoying but effective. In 19th century Alexandria, consuls protected criminals of their own nationality, but also helped introduce quarantine and fight cholera. Consuls organised a peaceful transfer of power from Turkey to Greece in Salonika in 1912, but failed to do the reverse in Smyrna in 1922. (Today, as protection from their own governments, businessmen in the Levant still aspire to become consuls.)

Language was another form of integration. Before the triumph of English, the Levant



Smyrna around 1900

ANTHONY WYNN

had used lingua franca, the simplified Italian understood by all the nationalities who went to do business in the region: a business rather than a literary language, rarely written down. It was spoken by slaves, merchants and sailors; by the Beys of Tunis and Tripoli; and by Cervantes, Rousseau and Byron. The *Gentleman's Magazine* wrote in 1837 of an Englishman in the Levant: “He has talked lingua franca till he has half forgotten English.” Lingua franca showed the inhabitants’ desire to communicate with the outside world; they did not live in a cultural ghetto.

From 1840, with the spread of schools and growth of steam and rail travel, French – then the world language – replaced lingua franca. Pashas, viziers and sultans all spoke it, as did all the rulers of Egypt until King Farouk; Mustafa Kemal the moderniser of Turkey; the poet from Smyrna, George Seferis. It was an official language of the municipalities of Alexandria and Beirut. Young Turk revolutionaries learnt French in Paris (which they called a “star brighter than my dreams”). French words entered Turkish. Many Levantines were – and still are – polyglot, speaking several languages, often in the same sentence: French, Arabic, Turkish, Italian, Spanish, Greek or English. The Smouha family, who came to Alexandria from Baghdad via Manchester, called the “polyglot broth” of French, Arabic and English that they spoke in Egypt “frarabish”.

The Lebanese American historian William Haddad wrote: “The nation state is the prison

of the mind.” The Levant was a jailbreak. The Ottoman empire enforced few of the restrictions of European governments, and there were no ghettos. Travellers were astonished and attracted by the variety of races and costumes in these cities and the juxtaposition of mosques, churches and synagogues, inconceivable in European cities before 1970.

Smyrna enjoyed, according to the French botanist Piton de Tournefort, “an entire freedom of religion”. As some still do, Muslims entered churches to hear the music or gain divine protection. By 1700 Smyrna had 50 mosques, eight synagogues and seven churches (Catholic, Orthodox and Armenian). In many streets you felt you were in a Christian country.

Two hundred years later, when the city had a Christian majority, Edith Wharton wrote from Smyrna: “I could not get used to seeing the tramways blocked by trains of loaded camels, the *voitures de place* filled with veiled Turkish women and the savage-looking Turks and Albanians with weapons in their belts, side by side with fashionably dressed Levantines and Europeans.”

Houses were built in Ottoman-Levantine styles, often by builders from Albania and Macedonia. Later, Italian or Paris-trained architects were summoned. Palaces and houses like the Ras Al Tine palace in Alexandria, or Palais Surssock and Maison Pharaoun in Beirut, blended styles from different countries and centuries. After 1850, red tiles from Marseilles covered roofs throughout the region.

This hybridity affected architecture and public lives more than private lives. Religious authorities controlled marriages and encouraged people to live near their place of worship. Only after 1940, in Alexandria and Beirut, did marriages between different religions and races begin. In Smyrna they were rare.

Outside the home some men developed multiple identities: in the 17th century Sabbatai Sevi, the “false Messiah” of Smyrna, founded his own religion, with Christian and Muslim as well as Jewish elements. *Donme*, as his followers were called, are still an important element in Izmir and Istanbul. The Mohammed Ali dynasty of Egypt, living in Constantinople as well as Alexandria, were Ottoman, Egyptian and in some attitudes European. Alfred Surssock, who died in 1924, was both an Ottoman diplomat and a Beirut businessman, equally at home in Paris, Constantinople and Beirut. Levantine cities were so cosmopolitan that, to visitors from their hinterlands, Smyrna seemed to be a foreign country and Alexandria a European city moored off the coast of Egypt, while Beirut was the Paris of the Middle East.

Levantine cities were trading cities, integrated into the economic systems of Europe and Asia. Like Hong Kong or Dubai today, they were synonymous with enterprise. Smyrna exported figs and raisins; Alexandria cotton; Beirut emigrants to the Americas and Africa. People and business, not monuments, were their main attraction. Thackeray wrote that he liked Smyrna because, having no monuments to visit, it produced no “fatigue of sublimity”.

Ports bring music as well as freedom, and Smyrna created its own sound, *Smyrnaika* or *rebetiko*. It was the music of rebels, particularly appreciated by the *qabadays* (Turkish) or *dais* (Greek) – the toughs who worked, gambled and fought with each other. Rebetiko songs mixed western polyphony and eastern monophony and described the sufferings of the poor, the torments of love or the pleasures of hashish. As early as the 17th century, according to the French consul, the Chevalier d’Arvieux, Beirut was distinguished from neighbouring ports by “parties of pleasure”. It still is. Beirut has become the capital of Arab night life.

Levantine cities also brought education and modernity. Modern Turkey was born in the Levantine port of Salonika, birthplace of Mustafa Kemal. The Young Turk revolution broke out there in 1908, helped by the protection of foreign consuls and the proximity of foreign states. Latife Hanim, the wife of Mustafa Kemal and the first Turkish woman to be unveiled in public, was educated at a French school in Smyrna.


In our new global age, geography is biting back at history. Smyrna, Alexandria and Beirut are now trying to revive their cosmopolitan identities. Istanbul, by the 1970s entirely Turkish, is now a global business city again, the shopping centre of the Balkans and Black Sea. The Arab spring shows the desire of people in Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Libya and Tunisia to reconnect with the outside world and their Mediterranean past – break out of the prison of the nation state.

Today’s global cities – London, Paris, New York, Dubai – are new Levantine cities. (They have welcomed thousands of immigrants from Smyrna, Beirut and Alexandria.) Global cities share the same international character: increasingly different from their hinterlands, they act as educators, liberators and modernisers. Three hundred and fifty languages are spoken in London, and English is the new lingua franca.

The future belongs to cities with the energy and freedom of cosmopolitanism, rather than to inland capitals dominated by their military-industrial complex: to Beirut not Damascus; Dubai not Riyadh; New York not Washington. States are dinosaurs: cities are the future. *The New York Times* of 7 January 2012 called China “a thin political union composed of semi-autonomous cities.” We are all Levantines now.

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