The Levant means "where the sun rises": the eastern Mediterranean. Levant is a geographical word, free of the 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, hybride, 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. The stalls carried 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 in most Levantine cities. The Levant was a very near East where, thanks to Ottoman law and order, travel was relatively safe. They could, the consuls said, 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) and Alexandria (then Al-Fustat) signed capitulations.

Consuls acted both as servants of their own countries and as local protectors of the Druze community, asking Britain to"liberate" the area. In the 19th century the Levant was a very near East where, thanks to Ottoman law and order, travel was relatively safe. They could 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 in most Levantine cities. The Levant was a very near East where, thanks to Ottoman law and order, travel was relatively safe. They could, the consuls said, 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) and Alexandria (then Al-Fustat) signed capitulations. The Levant was a very near East where, thanks to Ottoman law and order, travel was relatively safe. They could, the consuls said, 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) and Alexandria (then Al-Fustat) signed capitulations.

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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 Sursock and Maison Pharaoun in Beirut, blended styles from different countries and centuries. After 1850, red tiles from Marseilles covered roofs throughout the region.

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