

**E.I.E.A.D.**  
**European Institute For Eurasian Dialogue**  
**Policies, Studies, Relations**

**The Origin of Levantine Communities in the Eastern Mediterranean Port Cities**

by Leonardo Manzari\* and Laura Ebreo\*

**Introduction**

“What is the Mediterranean? A thousand things together. Not a landscape but numerous landscapes. Not a sea, but a complex of seas. Not one civilization but a number of civilizations piled one above the other. To travel in the Mediterranean region is to find the Roman world in Lebanon, prehistory in Sardinia, Greek cities in Sicily, the Arab presence in Spain, and Turkish Islam in Yugoslavia. (...) All this because the Mediterranean is a very ancient crossroads on which, for thousands of years, everything has converged – men, beasts of burden, vehicles, merchandise, ships, ideas, religions, and the arts of living. Even plants.”<sup>1</sup>

The Mediterranean, as described by Fernand Braudel, is a natural border that separates and yet unites numerous civilizations. Dividing and bridging relations between the Empires that have ruled around the Mediterranean, the flexibility of borders made it easy for people to move from one area of the Mediterranean to another without being traced.

The foundation for the interest towards the history of Levantine Communities along the coasts of Eastern Mediterranean is the perception of their importance in the societies and economies of many Middle-Eastern and EurAsian countries, still today.

Over the centuries, despite the first commercial networks along the coasts of the Mediterranean Sea were issued by the Phoenicians, followed by the Greeks, the Romans and the Arabs, the origin of the Levantine Communities has to be searched in the commercial expansion of the Maritime Republics (Genoa and Venice above all), and then with the supremacy of the Ottoman Empire.

1. Braudel, Fernand, *Il Mediterraneo: Lo Spazio, la Storia, gli Uomini, le Tradizioni*, Bompiani, Milano, 2013.

**E.I.E.A.D. - EUROPEAN INSTITUTE FOR EURASIAN DIALOGUE**

Via Imbriani 48 – 70121 Bari - Italy – Cod.Fisc 93429050722

Tel. +39 346 7279906; +39 347 4782773 - [eiead@libero.it](mailto:eiead@libero.it); [eieadinstitute@gmail.com](mailto:eieadinstitute@gmail.com) - [www.facebook.com/eiead](http://www.facebook.com/eiead)

# E.I.E.A.D.

## European Institute For Eurasian Dialogue

### Policies, Studies, Relations

The dislocation of people belonging to the same community went to their advantage because they then had connections in strategic geographic areas along the Mediterranean.

Therefore, a particular attention in the case of different cultures interacting must be given to the commercial cities that give onto the Mediterranean sea:

Venice, Istanbul, Genova, Alessandria but one must not forget other prominent commercial cities of the time such as Smirne, Cairo, Jerusalem, Cyprus, Aleppo, Damascus.



Geographic overview of the main Levant commercial cities and trade routes throughout history (Pergamonmuseum Berlin, 2016)

**E.I.E.A.D. - EUROPEAN INSTITUTE FOR EURASIAN DIALOGUE**

Via Imbriani 48 – 70121 Bari - Italy – Cod.Fisc 93429050722

Tel. +39 346 7279906; +39 347 4782773 - [eiead@libero.it](mailto:eiead@libero.it); [eiead@libero.it](mailto:eiead@libero.it); [eiead@libero.it](mailto:eiead@libero.it); [eiead@libero.it](mailto:eiead@libero.it); [eiead@libero.it](mailto:eiead@libero.it); [eiead@libero.it](mailto:eiead@libero.it); [www.facebook.com/eiead](http://www.facebook.com/eiead)

E.I.E.A.D.

## European Institute For Eurasian Dialogue

### Policies, Studies, Relations

#### **The Ottoman Empire**

The origin of many ideas that we have regarding the Ottoman Empire can be traced back to the time of the Crusades, when the clash between the Christian and the Muslim religions was strong. The Christian defeat was an important historical moment in the West, whilst in the Ottoman Empire it was part of a larger expansion process, taking place under Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-1566).

Throughout time commercial and financial relations between European powers and the Ottoman Empire were rarely interrupted despite numerous wars and conflicts took place, along with tense diplomatic relations, Bayezit I, who occupied his father, Murat I's, throne in 1389, embraced as subjects all those who were willing to be loyal to the sultan and comply to the Empire's taxation system, government and new lands. This meant the inclusion of individuals of any religious faith, and therefore Christians and Jews were accepted as subjects of the Ottoman Empire.

The prime aim of Mehmet II, successor of Bayezit was the conquest of Constantinople. This strategic geographic location brought with it a great economic prize. It had the best-situated ports of the world and was by definition the perfect middle city of commerce. Many goods were traded through the city, from luxury goods to ones of daily consumption such as grain. Constantinople was taken in 1453. The Ottoman state left in the hands of the religious communities of Christians, Jews and Muslims most matters that regarded civil and criminal justice, education and welfare of their own communities. The ones who took care of the administration in the communities were the wealthier individuals; it was up to them to also provide public welfare such as drinking water, fountains and baths.

To coexist peacefully with all religious communities, the Ottoman Empire ordered the different religions into *millets*, a system which existed prior to the rise of the Ottoman Empire. Every different religious community had its own *millet*, or "nation". Each *millet* had its own education and welfare system and even a personal law of their members. The leaders of the *millets* brought forth to the sultan the needs of their own communities.

**E.I.E.A.D. - EUROPEAN INSTITUTE FOR EURASIAN DIALOGUE**

Via Imbriani 48 – 70121 Bari - Italy – Cod.Fisc 93429050722

Tel. +39 346 7279906; +39 347 4782773 - [eiead@libero.it](mailto:eiead@libero.it); [eieadinstitute@gmail.com](mailto:eieadinstitute@gmail.com) - [www.facebook.com/eiead](http://www.facebook.com/eiead)

# E.I.E.A.D.

## European Institute For Eurasian Dialogue

### Policies, Studies, Relations

Although Islam was the Empire's official religion, some *millets* were explicitly recognized by the law, such as the Greek Orthodox one, or, as was the case of the Jewish *millet*, were simply recognized by tradition.

Meanwhile, *millets* such as the Catholic one were not officially recognized by the law but were *millets de facto* and their religious leaders had great powers.

Those who belonged to *millets*, were not allowed to serve in the army or take part in the central government of the Empire and they paid a special tax.

At the same time, the *millets* had a consistent economic advantage with the existence of “capitulations”. These privileges were given to friendly countries and trading partners, who were exempt of local taxation, persecution and the search of people's private home; it guaranteed the right to trade in the Empire under the Sultan's protection and there was a favourable reduction in customs duties. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this preferential treatment was put to an end with the rise of the Young Turks, a movement of Ottoman generals who took over the Empire's power in 1908.

Until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the city of Istanbul was divided in three major parts, where the north of the Golden Horn was known as Galata or Pera, the old Genoese quarter. Along the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, Pera became inhabited prevalently by Greeks, together with Armenians, who already populated most of the rest of the city. In the more northern part of Pera there resided most of the European ambassadors, who acquired a greater importance towards the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Genoese and the other Europeans of Pera were considered highly on behalf of the Sultan, indeed the Sultan had collaborated much with the Greeks.

Within this community of Pera there was a component, denominated “Levantine Community”. Their origin can be traced back to the Fourth Crusade in 1204, and in the creation of the oldest Italian colony which founded the “Magnificent Community of Pera”, composed until 1669 of aristocrats and knights and later of many artisans. The central pillar which held together the community was the Christian religion, which allowed it to be recognized as a *millet*.

**E.I.E.A.D. - EUROPEAN INSTITUTE FOR EURASIAN DIALOGUE**

Via Imbriani 48 – 70121 Bari - Italy – Cod.Fisc 93429050722

Tel. +39 346 7279906; +39 347 4782773 - [eiead@libero.it](mailto:eiead@libero.it); [eieadinstitute@gmail.com](mailto:eieadinstitute@gmail.com) - [www.facebook.com/eiead](http://www.facebook.com/eiead)

E.I.E.A.D.

## European Institute For Eurasian Dialogue

### Policies, Studies, Relations

An important characteristic of the levantines was their multiple identity; over the centuries, Italians mixed with all the other European descendants present in Istanbul, mainly Greeks, so long as they were Christians, creating a multiplicity of cultural influxes and a knowledge of several languages.

Another distinctive element of them was their multilingualism: all levantines knew four languages. French was the language of culture and high society (like in Europe), Italian (initially the most common one) was one of commerce and business, Greek was the most common spoken language in the streets and at home, of the domestics, shopkeepers, small merchants of the quarter <sup>2</sup>. Meanwhile the fourth language was Turkish, a language all levantines knew but pretended they didn't, as a sign of refusal to integrate completely in the local society, even after 1923. Education followed these lines; levantines went to Italian schools and had an Italian instruction until around 1870, when the most attended schools were the religious and French ones. Notwithstanding their effort to identify with the Italian nationality rather than the Ottoman one, they still wanted to distinguish themselves from the "new" Italians arriving, named "passing Italians", to underline their different identity and culture as Levantines. <sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Private interview between Pannuti and Livio Missir, in Pannuti,

<sup>3</sup> Pannuti, Alessandro, *Cenni sugli Italiani di Istanbul e sulla Levantinita`*.

**E.I.E.A.D. - EUROPEAN INSTITUTE FOR EURASIAN DIALOGUE**

Via Imbriani 48 – 70121 Bari - Italy – Cod.Fisc 93429050722

Tel. +39 346 7279906; +39 347 4782773 - [eiead@libero.it](mailto:eiead@libero.it); [eieadinstitute@gmail.com](mailto:eieadinstitute@gmail.com) - [www.facebook.com/eiead](http://www.facebook.com/eiead)

E.I.E.A.D.  
European Institute For Eurasian Dialogue  
Policies, Studies, Relations



The Aleppo Room: patterns from the banqueting hall of a rich merchant and broker in the Syrian city, 1600-1603  
(Pergamonmuseum Berlin, 2016)

**E.I.E.A.D. - EUROPEAN INSTITUTE FOR EURASIAN DIALOGUE**

Via Imbriani 48 – 70121 Bari - Italy – Cod.Fisc 93429050722

Tel. +39 346 7279906; +39 347 4782773 - [eiead@libero.it](mailto:eiead@libero.it); [eieadinstitute@gmail.com](mailto:eieadinstitute@gmail.com) - [www.facebook.com/eiead](http://www.facebook.com/eiead)

# E.I.E.A.D.

## European Institute For Eurasian Dialogue

### Policies, Studies, Relations

#### **Levantine Port Cities**

The historical importance of port cities is clearly summarized in an article entitled “Port-Cities in the Ottoman Empire: Some Theoretical and Historical Perspectives”<sup>4</sup>, as points of connection between the industrial centre and the agrarian periphery, in a world of capitalist economy, still in an early phase of its development.

In the 1400-1500s, the predominant commercial routes that the Ottoman Empire, or more in general the Middle East, entertained with Europe were the ones with the Maritime Republics in Italy, such as Venice and Genoa. However, with the discovery and the colonization of America, other European powers started to take over the commerce with the Middle East, slowly replacing the Maritime Republics; by the 1700-1800 England and France withheld great part of the commercial monopoly with the Ottoman Empire, also as a direct consequence of the industrial revolution.

The English had even instituted a specific Levant Company, in charge of commerce with the Middle Eastern region.

These port cities, hosted a great number of foreign merchants, diplomats and any other figure that was necessary in the international relations and commerce among the powers and those that mediated with the periphery. In this case, it was also possible to see that Imperial control was not so strong and tended to give them quite a bit of independence. Most port-cities of the Middle East, such as Aleppo, Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo and the less populated Jerusalem were characterised by an organization of space in concentric circles where the centre was occupied by the most important institutions of the city meaning the *bedestan* (covered market), the *bazaar* and the great mosque. Usually in the following concentric circle one would find the military section, in protection of the Citadel and the administration. The centre was therefore the section of the town where the public sphere took place meanwhile the more residential areas were to be found in the outer skirts of the city or in enclosed “pockets”.

4 Keyder, Caglar; Ozveren, Y Eyup; Quataert, Donald, “Port-Cities in the Ottoman Empire: Some Theoretical and Historical Perspectives”, in *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, Vol. 16, No. 4, Port-Cities of the Eastern Mediterranean 1800-1914, Fall 1993, pp. 519-558.

**E.I.E.A.D. - EUROPEAN INSTITUTE FOR EURASIAN DIALOGUE**

Via Imbriani 48 – 70121 Bari - Italy – Cod.Fisc 93429050722

Tel. +39 346 7279906; +39 347 4782773 - [eiead@libero.it](mailto:eiead@libero.it); [eieadinstitute@gmail.com](mailto:eieadinstitute@gmail.com) - [www.facebook.com/eiead](http://www.facebook.com/eiead)

# E.I.E.A.D.

## European Institute For Eurasian Dialogue

### Policies, Studies, Relations

This was functional to maintain order within the city and avoid riots and clashes among the numerous religions and cultures living each beside the other.

Beirut differed from this model of port city, it unfolded along the very stretched out coast line, and also because it became an important commercial city later than other port cities<sup>5</sup>. Beirut was very similar to European cities notwithstanding the fact that the foreign community was not at all a very consistent part of the population, however they did strongly influence the culture and the economic transformation, reaching a high level of integration in the local society.

On the other hand, the most stereotyped Oriental port city by excellence, where all the travellers' "exotic" expectations were met, was Damascus. It had undergone very few changes and it was very difficult to see European costumes even on behalf of the European diplomats, which perhaps had adopted the Syrian dresses.

During the rule of Muhammed Ali Pasha, governor of Egypt in the later 1700s, the ports of Alexandria, Beirut and Smirne grew in importance. Indeed Muhammed Ali's aim was to make Alexandria a "second capital" of the Mediterranean, and the local economy began to become more commercial and competitive<sup>6</sup>. On the other hand the port of Trabzon was subject to a great decline towards the end of the Ottoman Empire's life; Salonika and Patras maintained an in between status. In earlier periods Salonika had the role of redistribution within the Empire however in a later period towards the fall of the Ottoman Empire it had assumed a function of outlet exportation towards the whole Macedonian region<sup>7</sup>. The principal goods Smirne and Salonika exported to Europe, especially to the port city of Trieste was cotton, though in this period other than the traditional manufacturing of cloth and carpets, it began to increase the manufacturing also of soaps, silks and glass-blowing.

5 Ozveren, Eyup, "Port-cities of the Eastern Mediterranean 1800 – 1914", in *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, Vol. 16, No. 4, Fall, 1993, pp. 467-497, p. 469.

6 Ozveren, p.472.

7 Kasaba, Keyder, Tabak, "Eastern Mediterranean Port Cities and Their Bourgeoisies: Merchants, Political Projects, and Nation-States", p. 125.

**E.I.E.A.D. - EUROPEAN INSTITUTE FOR EURASIAN DIALOGUE**

Via Imbriani 48 – 70121 Bari - Italy – Cod.Fisc 93429050722

Tel. +39 346 7279906; +39 347 4782773 - [eiead@libero.it](mailto:eiead@libero.it); [eieadinstitute@gmail.com](mailto:eieadinstitute@gmail.com) - [www.facebook.com/eiead](http://www.facebook.com/eiead)

# E.I.E.A.D.

## European Institute For Eurasian Dialogue

### Policies, Studies, Relations

Meanwhile Beirut was important in the sale of Lebanese silk. In the 1700-1800s port cities acquired growing importance not only because Europe accelerated trade with the Middle East but also because internally there was a decline of traditional handicrafts and towns were placed under tighter control on behalf of the central power, meanwhile port cities maintained their relative autonomy and flourished<sup>8</sup>. Many people migrated from the inner land to the port cities increasing even more the melting pot that characterised these commercial areas.

In the late 1800s things began to change. The rise of nationalisms created tensions also within the the Ottoman Empire. Port cities were the hotbeds of the growing nationalist waves and this was not a coincidence. Indeed the economic power certainly gave a strong impulse for political independence, but more than this, most of the schools where these nationalist ideas emerged, were often financed by the bourgeoisie of the various different communities that lived in the port cities<sup>9</sup>.

Also, it was very common for wealthy families to send their children to study in Europe where the education was at the avant-garde of technological, scientific and political progress, thus becoming the best advocates of change<sup>10</sup>. Other port cities were simply a good access for the circulation of information, such is the case of Alexandria which became the centre for Syrian refugee intellectuals, and also the case of Salonika the stronghold of the Young Turks and home town of Mustafa Kemal, also known as Atatürk, father of Turkey.

The creation of nation-states in the West, the dismantlement of the Ottoman Empire and the creation of the concept of minority made it difficult for small communities to maintain their separate identity in a host new born nation. Many individuals migrated back to their homelands or decided to embrace a full integration in their host nation, losing great part of their old identity.

8 Kasaba, Keyder, Tabak, "Eastern Mediterranean Port Cities and Their Bourgeoisies: Merchants, Political Projects, and Nation-States", p. 129.

9 Kasaba, Keyder, Tabak, "Eastern Mediterranean Port Cities and Their Bourgeoisies: Merchants, Political Projects, and Nation-States", p. 133.

10 Keyder, Caglar; Ozveren, Y Eyup; Quataert, Donald, "Port-Cities in the Ottoman Empire: Some Theoretical and Historical Perspectives", p. 522.

**E.I.E.A.D. - EUROPEAN INSTITUTE FOR EURASIAN DIALOGUE**

Via Imbriani 48 – 70121 Bari - Italy – Cod.Fisc 93429050722

Tel. +39 346 7279906; +39 347 4782773 - [eiead@libero.it](mailto:eiead@libero.it); [eiead@libero.it](mailto:eiead@libero.it); [eiead@libero.it](mailto:eiead@libero.it); [www.facebook.com/eiead](http://www.facebook.com/eiead)

E.I.E.A.D.

## European Institute For Eurasian Dialogue

### Policies, Studies, Relations

During the two World Wars, when nationalisms became stronger, like in Turkey, all minorities were encouraged to uniform to the “Turkish” population. For levantines, it was difficult to feel the sense of belonging to any one nation, them being of so many different origins. Furthermore, with the loss of the capitulations and the weakening of contacts with their motherland, the levantines became more and more an isolated community losing not only economic but also political power.

#### **The role of Levantine Communities today**

Levantine communities and descendants of the ancient families, are still present in all the Eastern Mediterranean contest, even if their numbers continue decreasing. Their role today, inside the relevant countries, has assumed a different configuration, according to the social, political and economic evolution of these nations. Following altogether the destiny of their own families, throughout the centuries.

We could assume that, in vast industrial countries (like Turkey), after having impressed the typical “familiar” character to the capitalist and entrepreneurial system (still based on very large multi-sectorial conglomerates, referable to single families), their activities have evolved from the traditional shipping and trading activities towards a larger differentiation of sectors, including capital-intensive industries, financial&advanced services, cultural and touristic organizations. Even if very small minorities, they are quite active in the cultural and civil life of the country, often putting their strong links with their original homelands at the service of the country and its institutions. Various associations, each with cultural, macro-economic, industrial, social, historical imprint are gathering them in Turkey like in England, France etc.

In latest years they have also gained an important role as investment attraction testimonials, in both directions, supporting foreign investors in becoming closer and closer to Turkey, driving Turkish investors towards profitable opportunities in their original homelands.

**E.I.E.A.D. - EUROPEAN INSTITUTE FOR EURASIAN DIALOGUE**

Via Imbriani 48 – 70121 Bari - Italy – Cod.Fisc 93429050722

Tel. +39 346 7279906; +39 347 4782773 - [eiead@libero.it](mailto:eiead@libero.it); [eieadinstitute@gmail.com](mailto:eieadinstitute@gmail.com) - [www.facebook.com/eiead](http://www.facebook.com/eiead)

E.I.E.A.D.

## European Institute For Eurasian Dialogue

### Policies, Studies, Relations

On the other hand, countries which are more isolated compared to the rest of the world (like Syria before the current conflict, or Iran during the decades of autarchy) still recognize in the Levantine communities, their main private business communities, representing an example of entrepreneurship (mostly in labour-intensive sectors) for the rest of the population, and with strong links with the local governments. In these conditions, they often play a role of national private monopolist in their sectors, thus becoming stable suppliers of the State-owned companies and administrations. But especially operating as “communication channels” between the local ruling class/political elites and the international business&financial community.

This means that, after centuries, Levantine communities still represent a thermometer of the social and economic health of this troubled region, and an important reference for whom it is relevant to build economic and entrepreneurial networks. Without a doubt Maritime Republics had on the long run engaged in a worthy path.

\*Leonardo Manzari, Director of EIEAD, Laura Ebreo Research Fellow in Modern History.

**E.I.E.A.D. - EUROPEAN INSTITUTE FOR EURASIAN DIALOGUE**

Via Imbriani 48 – 70121 Bari - Italy – Cod.Fisc 93429050722

Tel. +39 346 7279906; +39 347 4782773 - [eiead@libero.it](mailto:eiead@libero.it); [eieadinstitute@gmail.com](mailto:eieadinstitute@gmail.com) - [www.facebook.com/eiead](http://www.facebook.com/eiead)