

At the Crossroads of Masonic Traditions
HISTORY OF TURKISH FREEMASONRY

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Turkish Freemasonry is an outstanding example in terms of the historical interaction of different masonic traditions. However, in order to understand this interaction, it is necessary to mention few issues related to the multicultural, multireligious and colorful social life in the wide geography of the Ottoman Empire spread over three continents. In the Ottoman lands where the East and the West flow into each other through culture and trade, Freemasonry reached to the rich Ottoman ports through Western traders and diplomats.¹ Starting from 1721, lodges from different constitutions operated in commercial cities such as Istanbul, Izmir, Thessaloniki and Alexandria. Other cities such as Beirut, Aleppo and Damascus were included in this list of places with masonic activities over time.²

Looking at the historical panorama of the 19th century, the Crimean War is one of the most important milestones for the modernization efforts of the Ottoman Empire.³ British and French troops and officials who fought along with Ottomans against Russians had important effects on the Ottoman social life and understanding. The most remarkable of these impacts was the Reform Edict declared on February 18, 1856 after the Crimean War, expressing equality to minorities and foreigners in the Ottoman Empire. The Reform Edict also brought diplomatic patronage for the embassies to their own citizens. As it can be easily guessed, the aforementioned right of protection has brought important freedom to the activities of the lodges.

Following the Reform Edict, we see several short living attempts of establishing grand lodges over the Ottoman territory. By 1857, under the influence of Grand Orient de France, a grand lodge named "Grande Loge de Turquie" was established in Izmir, consisting of six lodges. Besides this short term acting grand lodge, an irregular grand lodge of Irish origin

¹ Atabek, Reşat, "Masonluk Üzerine" [On Freemasonry], Mimar Sinan Research Lodge Publications, Istanbul, 1994, pp. 176-184.

² Layiktez, Celil, "Türkiye'de Masonluk Tarihi" [History of Freemasonry in Turkey], Yenilik Publishing House, Istanbul, 1999, Volume:1, p.3.

³ Crimean War took place between 1853 and 1856 in which Russia lost to an alliance of Ottoman Empire, United Kingdom, France and Sardinia.

entitled "The Grand Lodge of the Ancient and Honorable Fraternity of Free and Accepted Masons of Turkey" was also founded in Istanbul. Moreover, a provincial grand lodge of the United Grand Lodge of England was also established in Istanbul but could not continue its effectiveness and activities.⁴

It is important to note that lodge members up to these dates were generally foreigners. Local people –including Muslims, Greeks, Armenians, Jews- were not much interested in Freemasonry and, in several instances, they were not accepted to the lodges.⁵ In fact, already in the first half of the 19th century, “Freemasonry” is a word among the local people that meant godless, betrayer and almost used as a curse.⁶ However, this approach changed over the years and local people started to be welcomed to these lodges and finally the elites of the Ottoman bureaucracy have also been included in this masonic enthusiasm.

After the Reform Edict which was announced in 1856, lodges from several foreign constitutions such as France, England, Italy, Scotland, Ireland, Germany, Spain, Poland, Hungary, Romania and Greece were operating over the Ottoman territory. Those lodges from so many different masonic traditions interacted with each other. Needless to say, this interaction also included competition. Moreover, this competition was not only about gaining new members or recruiting members from each other. Let us not forget that in the second half of the 19th century, there was a polarized world full of confrontations among European countries. In such a political climate, the lodges which were protected by foreign consulates were treated by the Western governments as missionary institutions that would help to expand their influence in the East.

At this point, the term "Colonial Freemasonry" used by Paul Dumont is also suitable for Ottoman Freemasonry.⁷ However, a different aspect will emerge for Ottoman intellectuals over time. It should be recalled that the project of transforming the Ottoman Empire into a modern state structure was running under the pressure of both local elements and foreign influences. In

⁴ Layiktez, Celil, “Short History of Freemasonry in Turkey”, Rekmay Publishing House, Ankara, 2009, pp. 11-12.

⁵ Zarcone, Thierry, “Le Croissant et Le Compas”, Dervy Publications, 2015, p. 31.

⁶ Nisanyan, Sevan, In Nisanyan Dictionary, under the headings of “Freemason” it is said that it means atheist, unbeliever, irreligious and denier according to the work of Ahmed Vefik Pasha named *Lehce-i Osmânî*, dated 1876.

⁷ Dumont, Paul, “Osmanlıcılık, Ulusçu Akımlar ve Masonluk” [Ottomanism, Nationalist Movements and Freemasonry], Yapi Kredi Publications, Istanbul, 2000, pp. 52.

this context, it is not surprising that the Ottoman masons of that period saw Freemasonry as a means of carrying the enlightenment ideas of the French Revolution and Western thought to the East. This made it easier for the lodges to turn into meeting places suitable for Ottoman intellectuals.

On the other hand, it would be appropriate to say that the enlightenment ideas of the period were not only due to the French Revolution but also to the simultaneous interaction of many factors. For example, the uprising which failed between 1834 and 1848 in Italy led by Mazzini and Garibaldi should be noted. The prorevolutionists fled from Italy were taken refuge by Ottoman Empire and without a doubt, they were the reflection of Italian Freemasonry in the Ottoman world with the republican ideas they brought.⁸

As an interesting example of competition between masonic constitutions in the Ottoman world, the relationship between France and England in Egypt can be given.⁹ Egypt was the richest and most important province of the Ottoman Empire for a long time. It can be argued that the deep administrative problems experienced by the Ottoman Empire with the Egyptian province provided the ground for the rapid organization of Freemasonry in this region. In fact, the translation of foreign rituals into the local language with the contributions of local people has been first done in Egypt.¹⁰ Until that time, lodges worked with the language of the grand lodge to which they belonged and translations were made only when necessary. These language barriers were overcome with the acceleration of the participation of local people into Freemasonry and the opening of lodges working in different languages. However, one certain thing is that the development and institutionalization of Freemasonry in Egypt had effective impacts on Ottoman Freemasonry. Let us immediately state that the founder of the Ottoman Supreme Council, the first national masonic institution established within the Ottoman Empire, was the Egyptian Prince Abdülhalim Pasha. Although the Ottoman Supreme Council which

⁸ Iacovella, Angelo, "Gönye ve Hilal" [The Square and the Crescent], Tarih Vakfı Publications, Istanbul, 2005, p. 11.

⁹ Koloğlu, Orhan, "İslam Âleminde Masonluk" [Freemasonry in the World Of Islam], Kırmızı Kedi Publishing House, Istanbul, 2011, pp. 34-38.

¹⁰ There was also another example in Istanbul for the lodge named "L'Union d'Orient" that initiated local Muslims in 1867 with Turkish rituals. Also for the early Turkish rituals before the establishment date of Ottoman Grand Orient; see: Ağaoğlu, Yavuz Selim, "Başlangıcından Günümüze Türk Masonluğunda Ritüeller Çırak Derecesi 1909-2012" [Rituals in Turkish Freemasonry From Beginning To Present, Entered Apprentice Degree, 1909-2012], Izmir Valley Research Lodge Publications No:20, October, 2019, Volume:3, Appendix:1-2, p:1877-1928.

was established in 1861 could not meet the expectations and could not perform satisfactory masonic activities, it deserved to be a turning point for the Ottoman Freemasonry and was also recognized by the Southern Jurisdiction of the Scottish Rite in 1869.

The meeting of masonic ideals with Ottoman intellectuals in the 19th century is important to analyze. The ideas of freedom, equality, fraternity, justice and progress embedded in Freemasonry attracted the enlightened elite of the Empire. Moreover, this elite was coming from different cultural roots and confessions. Without a doubt, Freemasonry, with its approach based on universal brotherhood, obtained an important and privileged position among the Ottoman elite in a short time and connected people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds on its basis of brotherhood. As a matter of fact, those ideas attracted particular attention from the opposition intellectuals. It is also worth to note the cautious approaches of the Ottoman Palace towards Freemasonry at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. However, this cautious position has different colors, as the interest in Freemasonry among the Ottoman intellectuals was even reflected to the dynasty members over time and sultan's sons Murat, Nurettin and Kemalettin Efendi were initiated to a lodge under the French constitution.¹¹ Perhaps, it is not possible to say that these brothers from the palace have performed standard masonic lodge practices, but nevertheless these exceptional initiations had a great impact in Europe with their symbolic meaning. The greatest excitement, of course, must have happened with the throning of a Freemason, namely Murat the 5th. The power of Murat didn't last long in this very turbulent period of Ottoman politics. In fact, this is a period where Freemasonry and Ottoman politics are intertwined which caused Freemasonry to be followed more carefully than ever in the Ottoman lands both from inside and outside.

In this turbulence, the up and down periods of Freemasonry on the Ottoman territory can be easily observed. For example, it is known that some of the lodges closed in time because of losing members due to police proceedings and no lodge belonging to Grand Orient de France in Istanbul remained at the end of 1901. Sometimes diplomatic immunity was used to overcome certain problems. On the other hand, some lodges from other constitutions were able to continue their activities, albeit difficultly. In these up and down periods, less effective detective measures in cities far from the capital city, Istanbul, enabled Freemasonry to organize more easily.

¹¹ Koloğlu, Orhan, "Abdülhamit ve Masonlar" [Abdulhamid and the Freemasons], Eylül Publications, September, 2001, pp. 97-101.

A striking issue in the history of Freemasonry in the Ottoman Empire is its relation to the Young Turk movement opposing the Palace and their political party called Union and Progress. This movement took Freemasonry as an organizational model. Moreover, the Macedonia Risorta Lodge, which operated in Thessaloniki under the Italian constitution, decided to initiate the Young Turks for the formation of an opposition to the Sultan Abdulhamit who was the successor of Murat. The density of initiations made during this period is striking. It seems that the opposition to the Palace is intertwined with Freemasonry at this point.¹²

This relationship, which started with the confidence of being under the protection of the Italian Embassy was not only limited to the Macedonia Risorta Lodge. After a while, it was even deemed appropriate to switch to lodges under different constitutions, instead of a single one. The Veritas Lodge under the Grand Orient de France and the Perseverancia Lodge under the Grand Orient of Spain present such instances.

We will not elaborate here all the political developments of the time but it should be noted that Sultan Abdülhamit was eventually dethroned and the contribution of Freemasons to this outcome is obvious. All these developments resulted in a very positive atmosphere in Europe towards the Young Turks who were seen as a “masonic success”. In this framework, some lobby activities of the Union and Progress Party in Europe were carried out with enthusiastic support of the grand lodges in these countries.¹³

At the beginning of the 20th Century, it was thought that the conditions had matured to have an independent grand lodge over the Ottoman territory. This also meant existing constitutions entering into a power race to influence this new formation. However, the plans of the Union and Progress Party for this new organization were different. Through the support of the Supreme Council of Belgium, it was preferred to first reorganize the Supreme Council of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite, instead of a grand lodge. In this choice, it should be

¹² As an example, a well-known Freemason named Michel Noradounghian from Renaissance Lodge wrote in a letter dated January 25, 1909 which was sent to Grand Orient de France; “(..) Freemasonry played a great role in our political activities. Especially in Thessaloniki, Macedonia Risorta Lodge of Grande Oriente d’Italia initiated the candidates who would like to join Union and Progress movement and provided such support” See: Anduze, Eric, “Osmanlı Türkiyesi’nde Masonluk 1908-1924” [La Franc-Maçonnerie de la Turquie Ottomane, 1908-1924], translated by Can Kapyalı, Sokak Kedisi/Omnia Publications, Istanbul, 2012, p. 63.

¹³ Dumont, Paul, *ibid*, pp. 97-121 and Iacovella, Angelo, *ibid*, p. 45.

taken into consideration that the Union and Progress Party which had proved its power might have preferred to establish a top-down and powerfully centered authority in Freemasonry.

Prince Aziz Hasan Pasha, who was also an Egyptian, was assigned to the re-establishment of the Ottoman Supreme Council by means of the Egyptian Supreme Council at the Conference of Supreme Councils in 1907 in Brussels. The Ottoman Supreme Council, which was originally founded in 1861 but could not operate, would thus be brought to life. A sufficient number of masons had to be raised to 33th degree in order to reorganize the Supreme Council and the Supreme Council of Belgium made the necessary contribution in this direction.¹⁴

After the Ottoman Supreme Council, which was established on March 3, 1909 according to the 1786 Constitution of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite, the Ottoman Grand Orient, which will take over the responsibility of the first three symbolic degrees of this rite, was established on 13 July 1909. By December of 1909, both the Grand Orient and the Supreme Council were already recognized by their counterparts in several parts of the world such as Belgium, Canada, Chile, Egypt, Greece, Haiti, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, North America, Portugal, Switzerland, Venezuela.¹⁵

Starting from the establishment of the Ottoman Grand Orient, a gradual route change is observed. The idealist influence of Freemasonry on the chessboard of international relations kneaded by giant conflicts of interest remained very limited. In the face of the rise of nationalism and challenging conflicts of interest, the dream of people of different ethnicities and cultures to live together fraternally and equally in freedom will be slowly pushed away.

Within such a framework, shortly after its establishment, the Ottoman Grand Orient took steps to reduce the impact of European grand lodges on the Ottoman territory and monopolize all the lodges to be established.¹⁶ To this end, the founders aimed to open new lodges over the Ottoman territory in a very short time and in a very wide geography. Interestingly, when the rituals and regulations of the Ottoman Grand Orient are examined, a synthesis aiming to bring masons from different masonic traditions under the same roof is visible. Additional attention

¹⁴ For documentation on the establishment of Ottoman Grand East see Mimar Sinan Periodical, Special Edition, No:157, The Journal of Grand Lodge of Turkey, 2012.

¹⁵ Anduze, Eric, *ibid*, pp. 85-86, 163-168.

¹⁶ Dumont, Paul, *ibid*, pp. 82.

was paid and arrangements were made to respond to the participation of local Muslim elements. For this purpose, similarities to Islamic orders that have been active in social life for centuries were utilized with explicit references in the masonic ritual language and practices.¹⁷ It is not surprising that the similarities between the initiatory, esoteric tradition of Freemasonry and the esoteric cult tradition of the Eastern world were highlighted in this period. From another point of view, it can also be thought that this was a prestigious act for local people who approached negatively or stayed distant to Freemasonry for so long.

On the other hand, the project of establishing a grand lodge in the Ottoman Empire by the Union and Progress Party doesn't seem to be particularly welcomed in England.¹⁸ This was probably because the Young Turk movement was welcomed in certain Muslim colonies or zones of influence of Britain which followed the political movements in the Ottoman Empire with interest.¹⁹ Moreover, the fact that English freemasonry was left behind the establishment of the Ottoman Grand Orient might have been unappreciated as well.

More generally, this is a period where gigantic interstate conflicts of interest cause strong winds everywhere and Freemasonry gets its share. For example, relations with Italian Freemasonry, which was very good at the outset are on the rock by the 1911 Tripoli War and the events that followed. The Ottoman Grand Orient asks the Grand Orient of Italy to use their influence on the Italian government in order to prevent the annexation of Tripoli by Italy, but cannot get the answer it was looking for.²⁰ Short after, the roads between the two grand lodges that were in close relationship just a few years ago are separated.

1912 is the year of disasters for the Ottoman Empire. First, the Balkan War and then the fall of Thessaloniki caused a great indignation among the lodges. Especially the declaration of independence of Muslim Albania in November 1912 deepens the disappointments. It seems like the steps taken in good faith for the establishment of freedom, equality, fraternity and peace have reached a different result than expected.

¹⁷ Ağaoğlu, Yavuz Selim and Sanver, M. Remzi, "Freemasonry and Secular Spirituality In The Ottoman Grand Orient", Mimar Sinan Periodical, The Journal of Grand Lodge of Turkey, Istanbul, 2018, No:180, pp.11-21.

¹⁸ Hepkon, Haluk, "Jön Türkler ve Komplo Teorileri" [Young Turks and Conspiracy Theories], Kaynak Publications, October 2007, pp. 74-75.

¹⁹ Koloğlu, Orhan, "İttihatçılar ve Masonlar" [Members of Union and Progress and Freemasons], Pozitif Publications, February 2005, pp. 151-156.

²⁰ Iacovella, Angelo, *ibid*, pp. 53-54.

Following the start of the First World War, the activities of the lodges were halted upon the order of the government. The war also stopped relations with foreign grand lodges. Masonic activities were allowed again only after 1916. However, the situation in the country was getting more complicated, even the Grand Master being martyred on the Caucasian front. It is also worth noting that the grand lodges of Germany, Ottoman Empire, Bulgaria and Austria-Hungarian Empire, who were allied for the First World War, held a joint meeting in 1918 in Berlin.²¹

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire by the end of the war deeply affected every institution, every part of the society in terms of physical conditions as well as ideas. It is obvious that Ottoman Freemasonry was also strongly affected by this process of collapse. The Union and Progress Party was held responsible of losing the war and Ottoman Freemasonry received its share from this responsibility. As the First World War ended, in the distressed, problematic and pessimistic climate, the Union and Progress party liquidated itself and its rival came to power. Rıza Tevfik who was one of the prominent leaders of this opponent party was elected as Grand Master. In other words, the change in the Ottoman politics had its reflections over Ottoman Freemasonry.²²

A new period begun after this point for Ottoman Freemasonry. With the "War of Independence", the Anatolian lands remaining from the collapsed Ottoman Empire became a home to the establishment of a new state. As the new order came to power, the newly established Republic of Turkey took over and converted the institutions remaining from the Ottoman Empire. Naturally, this included Freemasonry. Even though the number of members had decreased to 500 and there was no lodge outside of Istanbul, the new Turkish Freemasonry never lost its color with its members of different religions, languages and origins.²³ The impact

²¹ For further readings, see: Ağaoğlu, Yavuz Selim - Arslan, Okan - Markner, Reinhard - Vári', László, "Berlin 1918", Izmir Valley Research Lodge Publications, No:19, April, 2019.

²² The interaction between Ottoman state politics and Ottoman Freemasonry can be observed in the minute books of that era. See: Ağaoğlu, Yavuz Selim, "Osmanlı Masonluğu 1917-1920 – Dâimî Hey'et-i Muazzama Zabıtları" [Ottoman Freemasonry 1917-1920 – The Minutes of Grand Officers' Meetings], Izmir Valley Research Lodge Publications, No:18, December 2018.

²³ The short history of Ottoman Grand Orient which was written by Isac Jessua who was a Grand Officer in 1922 gives us an opportunity to understand the climate of Freemasonry in Turkey in 1922. See: Jessua, Isac, "Grand Orient de Turquie Expose Historique Sommaire de la Maçonnerie en Turquie", Publication of Grand Orient of Turkey, Istanbul, 1922.

of Freemasons continues to be seen in social life and the institution adapted itself to this change. The Ottoman Grand Orient became the Grand Lodge of Turkey; elected its new rulers; revised its rituals and regulations according to the secular sensibilities of the newly established Republic and started to open new lodges. Between 1923 and 1935, we observe a Turkish Freemasonry whose number of members and lodges have increased rapidly; with a rich intellectual climate where every issue from spritualism to socialism, women's rights movements to scientific improvements could be spoken in lodge meetings; and having established very good relations with grand lodges over the world.

It is worth noting that, unlike the previous period, Freemasonry has taken care not to support or give the impression of supporting any opposing element to the newly established state. Nevertheless, its relationship with the state was not always very easy.²⁴ For example, the election of the grand master and grand officers was renewed twice in 1925 and once in 1930, with warnings coming from the capital city. Several notable politicians, including ministers were Freemasons but with the increasing nationalist winds in the world in 1930s, Turkish Freemasonry had to often defend itself by declaring that it is not an international order. In fact, in the 1930s, civil society organizations in Turkey were closed one by one due to a “central consolidation” while Freemasonry was a temporary exception. This lasted until 1935 when, with the strong winds ahead of the Second World War had brought Turkey, masonic activites were terminated until the reopening in 1948.

The reopening in 1948 was planned and implemented under the Supreme Council’s initiative.²⁵ For several years, lodges operated under the Supreme Council. The establishment of an independent grand lodge necessitated further time and was realized in 1956. This is a turning point which ensures, for the first time in Turkish masonic history, a Grand Lodge independent of the Supreme Council. This important development is related to the close relationship that Turkey had with the Anglo-Saxon world after the Second World War, which

²⁴ Ağaoğlu, Yavuz Selim – Sanver, M. Remzi, “Masonluk Tarihimizde 1965 Olayları” [The 1965 Events in the History of Turkish Freemasonry], Mimar Sinan Research Lodge Publications No:33, April 2016, pp. 5-142.

²⁵ For further reading on the reopening of Turkish Freemasonry in 1948, see: Ağaoğlu, Yavuz Selim, “Masonluk Tarihimizde Uyandırma” [Awakeninig in the History of Turkish Freemasonry], Izmir Valley Research Lodge Publications No:14, April, 2017.

in turn approached Turkish Freemasonry to the world of regular Freemasonry, an integration that happened in the 1960s.²⁶

Coming to our day, the Grand Lodge of Turkey consists of more than 260 lodges which gather around 17 000 Freemasons. All lodges use the same ritual, called the “Turkish ritual”, which is unique combination of Anglo-Saxon rituals, Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite Rituals and local elements. The working language is mostly Turkish but there are Albanian, English, French, German, Greek and Italian speaking lodges. As appendant bodies, there is only the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite, which is a separate organization with separate buildings. They recruit from our Grand Lodge and have around 4000 members. The relationship between the Grand Lodge of Turkey and the Supreme Council of Turkey is very harmonious. Moreover, the Grand Lodge of Turkey is in amity with over 160 sister grand lodges over the world, with a privileged relationship with some grand lodges in Western Europe, the Balkans and Africa, which extends to several lodge twinings and/or periodic intervisitations.

Turkish Freemasons represent an intellectual upper class of the country. Politics is certainly outside of the lodges and brothers do have different political opinions but values of the Republic of Turkey as established by Atatürk is a common source of inspiration. As such, Freemasonry is a center of attraction for the Turkish intellectual elite, especially for the young generation. As a result, the average age is continuously dropping, being actually below 50. Furthermore, there is an expansion of lodges throughout the country. For many years, Freemasonry in Turkey was limited to big cities such as Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir but now there are lodges in relatively smaller towns, even in some very conservative ones where the social culture does not welcome Freemasonry.

Two other grand lodges that operate in Turkey worth to be mentioned. One is the Liberal Grand Lodge of Turkey, with around 4000 members, created in 1966 from a schism within the Grand Lodge of Turkey following its joining the world of regular freemasonry. The other is the Women Grand Lodge of Turkey, with around 2000 members, created in early 1990s. Both grand lodges have an understanding of Freemasonry that lies out of the principles of regular Freemasonry. As a result, the Grand Lodge of Turkey does not have Masonic recognition with them but, as Masonic institutions of the same country, holds civilized relationships.

²⁶ For the integration process of Grand Lodge of Turkey to the world of regular Freemasonry, see: Ağaoğlu, Yavuz Selim – Sanver, M. Remzi, “Masonluk Tarihimizde 1965 Olayları” [The 1965 Events in The History of Turkish Freemasonry], *ibid*, pp. 150-274.

The history of Turkish freemasonry is an exciting, some times stormy but always colorful adventure in the general history of freemasonry. Its rituals and practices contain the traces of the interaction of different Masonic traditions along with the esoteric/initiative roots of the Anatolian culture. A such, they reflect a colorful and unique culture through which Turkish Freemasonry continues to contribute to the world of Freemasonry.