

# 19-20th Century Freemasonry in the Near & Middle East

## Ottoman Empire, Iran & Central Asia

### Ottoman Empire

It's a recognised fact that the **Ottomans** felt in **Freemasonry** a system very close to their own brotherhoods, called **Tarikat**, the recognition facilitated the emergence and consolidation of **Freemasonry** in the Empire. The *Ottoman* and the *Persian* quickly noticed the spiritual potential in "Better Men make a Better World". Under the **Islamic** perspective of unifying mind, reason and politics. The Brotherhood quickly bore the influence of a very close Initiatic correlation with the Esoteric aspect of Islam: **Sufism**.

We should now retrace historically the very old roots of **Freemasonry** in the *fertile crescent*. The first lodges started to appear around 1738 in *Izmir* and *Alepo*. In 1745, following the anti-Masonic campaign initiated by the Pope **Clement XII**, the *Greek* and *Armenian* patriarchs succeeded to convince the Sultan **Mahmud I** to persecute the *Order*. The ban lasted until 1762. Quickly after, many lodges were constituted mostly under the **English** and **French** constitutions. At the time, no *Muslims* are initiated. The lodges are mostly **Orthodox Christians** and **Jews**.

On the *African* continent, Freemasonry arrived in *Egypt* with **Napoléon**. It's interesting to note the *French* and *Italian* predominance over the *British*, *German* or *Swiss*. **Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité** reached beyond *Europe*. Sadly, until the 1850's, *Islam* saw in the **Brotherhood** a **Christian** organisation with missionary goals. However toward the end of the century, the *Muslim* elites discovered the virtue of emancipation through *ideals* carried by the **Masons**. In 1856, the **Hatt-i Hümayun** reform limited the *sharia* laws expanding personal liberty for **Freemasonry** to blossom. Foreign communities were the first to enjoy the new freedom and **French Masons** were the first to really bridge the gap with the *Muslim* world.

During the golden age of political and social freedom of the Empire, between 1863-1874, **Louis Amiable**, Worshipful Master of the lodge *Proodos* translate the **Rituals** and the **Constitution** into *Turk*. Almost instantly a great interest was expressed at the doors of the *Temples*. Still, localised documents don't explain in totality the attraction. Most of the **Ottoman Masons** were high ranking figures of the Empire involve in the democratisation of society. Even the short lived Sultan **Murad V** was initiated.

The Italian Brotherhood didn't stay inactive either. They introduced **Mazzini & Garibaldi** to their *Turkish* audience. The lodge *Orhanie* besides having *Muslims*, also adopt the *Turk* in 1868. **English Freemasonry** couldn't appear with the revolutionary aura of their *French* or *Italian* counterpart and could not compete. Nonetheless, the successes of the continentals was short-lived. In 1878, the authoritarian sultan **Abdülhamid II** abolished the previous liberal law passed by his predecessor. Many brethren preferred exile to persecution or state control. **Freemasonry** rose again at the turn of the

century through the **Grand Orient de France**. The young *Turks* fighting against the sultan even organised **Comité Union & Progrès** following the **Grand Orient** model. It's also important to note the influence of the Italian lodges of **Thessaloniki** in a *Greece* under centuries old *Ottoman* domination fertile in anti-governmental plots. A few years later, in 1909, the constitution was restored and an **Ottoman Grand Orient** was created. From 1908 to 1918, most of the political power was between the hands of **Freemasons**. A strange parallel can be drawn with the French political climate of the time in a *very different spectrum*. Heavily politicised, the brethren quickly lost their battle vis-à-vis of nationalism. The defeat the 1918 brought a halt to the situation. In the occupied and dismantled **Ottoman** empire the brotherhood found a fertile ground. Open support is given in 1923 to **Mustafa Kemal\*** in his creation of modern day *Turkey*.

### Iran

The first mention of Freemasonry in Persia was from a merchant, **Abd al-Latif Shûstari**, coming back from British India toward the end of the 1700s. He gave a *farsi* translation to the brotherhood: **Frâmîsîn** or **Frîmîsîn** meaning *builder* or *architect*. He was also aware that in the sub-continent and in the region the **Freemasons** were called **Farâmûshî**, the ones who forgot, because of the secrecy shrouding the order. A book in *farsi* about *our secrets* was even published in *Lucknow, India* in 1874. The order is generally perceived as being involved in **Magic** and **Alchemy** throughout *Asia*. A *Khan*, chief tribe, of **Kala Tuppa** from the south-east of **Afghanistan** even commented that visiting the *Freemasonic Hall* in *London*, one hour with *Freemasons* was equal the *knowledge of 50 wise men!!!*



A para-masonic organisation, **Farâmûshkhâna**, literally *the house of oblivion*, is constituted by *Mirzâ Malkum Khân* in 1858 following the precepts of the brotherhood. It was short lived experiment but lay the ground for the first internationally recognised **Persian** lodge, *French* of the **Grand Orient** under the name of le **Réveil de l'Orient** in 1907 with the emancipation of the country. The aftermath of the **World War** and the rise of **Fascism** will put slowdown to the inter-cultural experience.

**Secret et Sociétés secrètes en Islam - XIX-XX siècles**  
*Frang-Maçonnerie, Carboniera et Confréries Soufies*  
*Thierry Zarcone, Arché Milano 2000, France/Italie*

\* **Mustafa Kemal Atatürk** (indeterminate - 1881–10 November 1938) was a Turkish army officer, revolutionary statesman, and founder of the Republic of Turkey as well as its first President.