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## JAMAL AD-DIN AL-AFGHANI AND FREEMASONS IN EGYPT

### Abstract

Freemasons in the Middle East, including Egypt, have a rich history that began in the 19th century. European-influenced Masonic lodges soon became attractive to local elites and spread to various countries.

The association of Freemasons, which is associated with the name of the Muslim reformer Jamal ad-Din Afghani, played a significant role in the political life of Egypt. The article discusses the political activities of Masonic lodges operating in Egypt and Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani's political life in 1871-1879. To study the activities of the Muslim thinker, the primary sources that tell us about Al-Afghani's activity in that period, biographical studies about Al-Afghani, and existing studies about Freemasons are used.

**Keywords:** Al-Afghani, Freemasons, Islam, Ulama, Egypt.

The Freemasons society has been active in the Middle East since the 18th century and is directly related to Europe's influence on the region. Masonic societies became active in the Middle East in countries ruled by France, Great Britain, Italy, and Germany. Tunisia, Egypt, and Algeria were Islamic countries where the presence of the French or British soon became noticeable (Landau 1996, 188; Harland-Jacobs 2003, 448).

The first Lodge of Masons in the Middle East was established in the Ottoman Empire in Istanbul in the early 1720s<sup>1</sup>, which was followed by the foundation of similar lodges in other cities of the empire: in 1738, Masonic lodges were established in Aleppo, Izmir, and Corfu, and, in the 1740s – in Alexandretta, and later – in Damascus (Landau 1996, 188). Religious and ethnic minorities living in these countries, such as Greeks, Armenians, Christians, and Jews, were uniting in these Masonic lodges (Cannon 1985, 466). As for the Muslims, only a small number of Muslims became members of these lodges, and the majority were deprived of this opportunity. It was the reason for aggression among the local Muslim population that made them hostile towards these Masonic lodges. For this or other reasons, Masonic lodges have had their greatest critics from Muslim thinkers. Masonic lodges mostly united local elites. So, conspiracy theories existed in the lower strata. Hence, there are many documents depicting attacks against Freemasons, where Muslim authors (for example, 'Abd al-Rahman Sami 'Ismati, Sabir 'Abd al-Rahman Tu'aima) blamed Zionism for the rise of the Masonic movement<sup>2</sup>.

The Society of Freemasons was formed later in Egypt and connected to Napoleon's campaigns. In 1798-1799, Napoleon's general Kleber established the first Masonic lodge in Cairo (Landau 1965, 139). The lodge was called "Isis"<sup>3</sup> and it adopted the slogan of the French Revolution: "Freedom, Brotherhood, Equality" ("Liberté, Fraternité, Égalité") (Raafat 1999). The "Isis" lodge lasted only three years and was dissolved after Napoleon left Egypt. However, the French left the ideology that appeared again in Egypt when the Egyptian ruler Muhammad Ali sent the youth to Europe. They were surprised by the vast number of associations founded by private individuals. They saw that these associations founded by the

<sup>1</sup> Sait Chelebi, ambassador of Ahmet III in Paris, was the first founder of the Masonic Lodge in Istanbul.

<sup>2</sup> "Young Turks" contributed to the rise of Masonic lodges, but in 1935, Mustafa Kemal banned their activity in the Republic of Turkey. Later, Masonic lodge activity was also banned in Iraq, Egypt, and Syria (Landau 1996, 190).

<sup>3</sup> Isis – ancient Egyptian goddess of fertility and life, wife and sister of Osiris.

individuals became the cornerstones of the country's development. That is why they decided that similar Unions of this type would also contribute to the progress of the Arab world (Wissa 1989, 145).

In 1845, another Lodge, the "Pyramids", was founded in Cairo, directly governed by the Grand Orient of France (Wissa 1989, 146; Raafat 1999). The "Pyramids" played a significant role in the spread of Masonic ideology in Egypt. Consequently, Masonic ideology soon gained great popularity in Egypt.

During the following years, European states established various Masonic lodges in Egypt. In 1867, a branch of the English Masonic Lodge was founded in Cairo, which was called the Regional Lodge of Egypt and the Sudan. Two years earlier, in 1865, France had established the regional Grand Lodge in Alexandria (Wissa 1989, 146).

Among the members of the Masonic lodge operating in Egypt, researchers single out four persons: Prince 'Abd al-Halim, Salvatore Aventore Zola<sup>4</sup>, Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani, Idris Ragheb<sup>5</sup>.

Jamal al-Din al-Afghani visited Egypt for the first time in 1869 when he stopped in Egypt for 40 days on his way from Bombay to Istanbul. Two years later, in March 1871, he returned to Egypt to teach philosophy at Al-Azhar University. The Egyptian authorities also granted Al-Afghani a pension. Al-Afghani's position soon brought him into conflict with the local Ulama, and he was dismissed from Al-Azhar University. Despite this, al-Afghani continued his activities, and finally, he was expelled from Egypt in 1879.

As mentioned above, Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani's activity in Egypt dates back to the 1880s. During this period, Ismail Pasha (1830-1895) ruled Egypt. The war with Ethiopia<sup>6</sup> plunged the country into great debt and brought it under European influence. The state treasury was declared bankrupt, and creditor countries took control of the financial system. Accordingly, Europeans also appeared in the Egyptian government cabinet.

Al-Afghani's involvement in Masonic lodge activities is related to political reasons. Several sources and documents confirm his contacts with Freemasons. The first among them is a letter dated 1875, in which he requested to join one of the lodges in Cairo. The identification of the lodge is difficult because the letter does not mention the name of the lodge, and also al-Afghani is known to have been a member of several lodges at the same time (Kudzi-Zadeh 1972, 27; Keddie 1966, 518). Also, there are letters in which Al-Afghani is invited to various events organized by Masons. Such is the letter of February 3, 1879, in which Al-Afghani is invited to the meeting of the "Cairo Greek Lodge". Also, evidence is provided by a letter received from Paris in 1884, which confirms the fact that al-Afghani joined one of the local unions while living in Paris (Kudzi-Zadeh 1972, 27). Despite these facts, some scholars deny Al-Afghani's Masonic lodge membership altogether (Mette 1989, 162).

Little information is available about Al-Afghani's activities in Masonic lodges, although his goal why he tried to join these lodges was obvious. Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani initially joined the Italian Masonic lodge operating in Cairo, but later, he became interested in the British-influenced lodge "Kawkab al-Sharq" ("Star of the East")<sup>7</sup>. In 1875, Al-Afghani joined the "Kawkab Al-Sharq" Masonic Lodge and became the chairman of this lodge in just three years. The lodge had been under the patronage of the Grand Lodge of England since its inception, but al-Afghani felt that his political activities and Islamic reform efforts were more suited to the activities of a French-style lodge, with more political discussions. Al-Afghani tried to awaken the Egyptians through political agitation, but it was pointed out to him that the Lodge was not a platform for political activity. For Al-Afghani, the Masonic lodge was a way to fight against tyranny and oppression.

Later, on the basis of this Masonic lodge, Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani formed the political union "Al-Hizb al-Watani al-Hurr" ("Free National Party"). This group played a special role in overthrowing Ismail Pasha and enthronement of Tawfik Pasha.

Al-Afghani tried to involve the Egyptian members of Masonic lodges in political activities in order to get Egypt out of the crisis. Since Masonic lodges in the Middle East were not distinguished by

<sup>4</sup> Salvatore Zola (1873-?) – was an Italian who arrived in Alexandria in the middle of the 19th century and offered the idea of establishing the Masonic Lodge "Pyramids".

<sup>5</sup> Idris Ragheb (1899-1922) – Governor of Qaliubyyah and founder of Masonic lodge. He was the Grand Master of the Masonic Lodge in Qaliubyyah for 30 years.

<sup>6</sup> The war between Egypt and the empire of Ethiopia occurred in 1874-1876. It ended with Ethiopia's victory. Egypt's failure plunged the country into heavy debts and hampered its African aspirations. At the same time, Egypt's defeat allowed Great Britain to establish a protectorate over Egypt.

<sup>7</sup> Lodge № 1355.

political activism, al-Afghani's efforts were opposed by the members of the lodges because they feared repression from the authorities. Such independence came as a surprise to al-Afghani, who accused the members of Masonic lodges of selfishness. Eventually, he was expelled from the lodge, although it is unknown which lodges he was expelled from and at what time. After Al-Afghani realized that he could not achieve his political goals with the Freemason movement, he formed a new "National Lodge" under his own leadership. Egyptian army officers, members of parliament, Ulama, journalists, and intellectuals united in this lodge, which was affiliated with the French Grand Orient.

The ruler of Egypt, Ismail Pasha, heard about the political activity of the new lodge founded by Al-Afghani. Muhammad Abduh<sup>8</sup>, a member of Al-Afghani Lodge, his disciple, and the famous Egyptian thinker, wrote about the plans to overthrow or allegedly kill Ismail Pasha. According to al-Afghani's plan, Ismail Pasha was to be attacked at the Qasr al-Nile bridge, which he crossed daily. However, Abduh noted that these plans were just part of private conversations. Al-Afghani was also accused of plotting a coup against Tawfiq, the next ruler of the Khedive dynasty, although al-Afghani himself denied these rumors in a letter dated 1883, in which al-Afghani blamed the Cairo police chief Usman Pasha for spreading the rumors (Kudsi-Zadeh 1972, 32). Al-Afghani wrote to Riyad Pasha that foreign Masons and their followers under the leadership of 'Abd al-Halim<sup>9</sup>, when he was the president of the Masonic lodge in Cairo, tried to bring al-Halim to power, causing al-Afghani to leave the lodge. This letter proves that Al-Afghani left the Masonic lodge a second time, although he was expelled from Egypt by Tawfiq's decision (Keddie 1976, 103).

On August 24, 1879, the police arrested Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani and deported him by ship bound for India. A few days later, a government statement was published in the Cairo newspaper "Al-Waqa'i' al-Misriyyah" ("News of Egypt"), according to which the authorities claimed that al-Afghani was accused of violently ruling a secret organization to destroy the religion and the world (Kudsi-Zadeh 1972, 34).

Al-Afghani did not stop his political agitation after the expulsion from Egypt. He soon moved to France, where he met Egyptian refugees and discussed with them the political ways of expelling Great Britain from Egypt.

As it appeared from Al-Afghani's activities, his membership in Masonic lodges was connected with a political goal. Al-Afghani saw that Egypt became the target of foreign interventions, and the financial crisis in the country grew; he realized that something had to be done and therefore decided to unite in the Masonic lodges in which the elite and intellectual part of this country also united. Al-Afghani's political activities coincided with the emergence of the Arab National Movement in Egypt and the founding of "Al-Hizb al-Watani" ("The National Party"). Whether al-Afghani had a direct connection with this party has not been confirmed. However, there are sources that the members of Al-Afghani Masonic Lodge joined this party<sup>10</sup>. As Muhammad Abduh argued, al-Afghani joined Masonic lodges for political and social purposes. Accordingly, for him, Masonic lodges were not secret religious groups where people gathered to perform various rituals, but Masonic lodges turned out to be a good platform for him to realize his own political goals.

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<sup>8</sup> Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) – Egyptian Muslim scholar, judge and main mufti. He was an active member of the Arabic Nahda and Islamic modernism movement in the 19th century in Egypt.

<sup>9</sup> Muhammad 'Abd al-Halim Pasha was the son of Muhammad Ali, the ruler of Egypt who was elected as the Grand Master of the Grand Orient of East in 1867. Muhammad Abd al-Halim Pasha became the main liaison for Al-Afghani in the activity against the Khedive dynasty (Wissa 1989, 147-148).

<sup>10</sup> Latif Salim and Sa'id Nasr are the officers who joined the National Party.

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