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FREEMASONRY IN EGYPT

Is it still around?

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Last month in Jordan a prestigious lineup of Western leaders led by President Clinton and three former US presidents paid their last respects to King Hussein. While all kinds of deductions as to why they had all turned up were disputed live on national TV from Bangkok to Cape Town, one inference was passed by. The wily king may have also been a Prince of Jerusalem, one of the highest titles conferred by Freemasons.

Whether or not Hussein visited Masonic lodges and took part in their rituals is unknown, yet there are persistent claims in certain circles that he was an honorary Grand Master. Not peculiar for a monarch who spent most of his reign juggling alliances, some of them treacherous. As a Freemason he would have kept excellent company for, besides the Mozarts, Goethes and Garibaldi, most of Europe's royals and several former American presidents including its incumbent vice-president, are professedly on the Masonic roster.

But wait a minute. Hussein Ibn Talal far from being a Westerner was a descendant of the Prophet. How then could a Moslem notable of his standing become an alleged member of a secret society with origins in the heartland of a 17th century Judeo-Christian Europe?

Adapting the Big Bang theory to Freemasonry, we discover how the French Revolution and subsequent Napoleonic Wars accounted for the dissemination of the 'Society' outside its known borders. Which is why by the late 19th century, Masonic lodges were scattered across the Ottoman Empire, from Constantinople where Young Turks were beguiled by the secretive brotherhood, to Greater Syria and Egypt where emerging nationalists aped their European assailant in their inherent opposition to autocratic authority.

In Egypt, Freemasonry imploded into feuding camps: Anglo-Saxon and French, ostensibly reflecting the dual imperialistic control --military and cultural-- which had entrenched itself along the Nile Valley.

A favorite Masonic hall south of the Levant was *Kawkab al-Shark*--Star of the East. Somehow, its propinquity to after-life symbolism conjured up echoes of the cult of Isis and Osiris giving it a distinct character and flavor. Lodges evidencing Ancient Egyptian names included Sphinx, New-Memphis, Pyramids, Cheops and Le Nil. Founded by Jules Cesar Zivy the latter loge was dependent on the Grand Orient of France.

The distinction of first modern Freemason in Egypt goes to General Kleber, the luckless man left behind by Napoleon to govern the "Oriental Empire. Since that time and up until April 1964, Freemasonry continued uninterruptedly in Egypt. What had started as a secret movement, eventually came out in the open as evidenced by notices in newspapers, the social pages and other forms of printed media.

Historians may assent however, Freemasonry in Egypt came out of the closet during the Orabi Revolt of 1882. That Ahmed Orabi Pasha was himself a member of the Order was

never proven, we know however that several of his supporters were.

In his book *How We Defended Orabi* A.M. Broadley declares that Egypt's most liberal cleric, Sheik Mohammed Abdou, was himself an avowed Mason. "Sheikh Abdu was no dangerous fanatic or religious enthusiast, for he belonged to the broadest school of Moslem thought, held a political creed akin to pure republicanism, and was a zealous Master of a Masonic Lodge." Later in the same paragraph Broadbent states how many of the Deputies in the Egyptian Chamber had hastened to join the craft.

Broadbent gives us an insight on Freemasonry in Egypt during the 1880s when he differentiates between the principles and practice of Freemasonry in England and on the continent in Europe. While the British system embraced nothing more exciting than charity and good-fellow-ship, "foreign Masonry is almost avowedly an appropriate and convenient arena for political discussion, and both political and religious agitation." Thus, according to Broadbent, "in Egypt the tenets of continental Masonry, with its Republican watchwords of Fraternité, Liberté, Egalité had evidently overshadowed the strong British elements which once prevailed in our numerous lodges."

Although none of the leaders of Egypt's National party belonged to the brotherhood, a large number of their subordinates were among its most active and zealous members, according to Broadbent. Part of a budding middle-class, Egyptian nationalists had joined the Society in an attempt to penetrate an impregnable ruling class guarded jealously by Mohammed Ali's descendants and their Circassian entourage. Consequently, when the Khedive's men arrested the *sartujar* (head of traders guild) of Sharkia charging him with conspiring against the state and supporting Ahmed Orabi Pasha's "insurgency" with money and the like, it was a Freemason barrister from London who took up his defense.

Nevertheless, the British-led kangaroo court in Cairo declared Orabi and his Freemason supporters guilty as charged--they had dared ask for the substitution of khedivial absolutism with a more representative government.

While Orabi was exiled to the crown colony of Ceylon, the *sartujar* and other Orabi sympathizers were sentenced to imprisonment and fines ranging from LE 1,000 to LE 5,000. The situation turned on the British several decades later with the arrival of Mohammed Farid and Saad Zaghloul. Self-declared Freemasons they respectively headed the National and Wafd parties which called for popular uprisings against Egypt's Anglo-Saxon occupiers.

With time, inter and intra-Freemasonry rivalries increased in proportion to the numbers of halls and lodges that surfaced all over Egypt. Scottish, French, Italian and English halls operated side by side with the National Grand Lodge of Egypt. There was even talk of a Masonic cemetery in Old Cairo to be shared with freethinkers and intellectuals.

Besides the British Craft and Marks Masons, the most important Halls within Masonic circles in Cairo were the Grecia and Bulwer lodges overlooking Midan Ismail (today, Midan Tahrir). *The Egyptian Gazette* dated 9 January 1903, states that "the new Masonic Hall [used by both lodges] comprises a commodious and handsome lodge-room capable of seating 100 brethren; a large assembly room; committee secretaries' and robbing rooms; as well as a refreshment room opening on to a spacious terrace whence a magnificent view is obtained on the new building of the Museum of Antiquities, Kasr-al-Nil barracks, the Nile and the open country beyond with the pyramids in the far distance." Both these lodges reported to the Grand Lodge of England

At the time there were about Egyptian 54 lodges operating in *Um al-Dunya*. Later, between 1940 and 1957 we find 18 Masonic halls listed in Cairo, 33 in Alexandria, 10 in Port Said, 2 in Mansourah, 2 in Ismailia and one each in Fayoum, Mehala al-Kobra and Minieh (numbers fluctuated slightly during the interim years). Throughout that period, the largest and most important Masonic Hall was located at No. 1 Toussoun Street in Alexandria.

Ignoring its working class origins, modern Freemasonry sought to attract the privileged elite. And since faith did not really matter, Anglicans, Catholics, Jews and Moslems from the power elite rubbed shoulders in Lodges and Halls across the Middle East. After all, one of the Society's basic ideas was the rejection of dogma.

But the society's secretive character rendered it an easy target for defamation and accusation. History abounds with situations where Church and State took turns at vilifying the elitist brotherhood often rendering it more surreptitious than it already was. If Freemasonry burst its banks during the French Revolution, when an entire nation revolted against church and state, it met with a devastating crisis during WW2 when Europe's traditional societies all but crumbled and when thousands of Freemasons ended their lives in German concentration camps. Other wars and revolutions, from Italy to Latin America, alternately pushed Freemasonry into the forefront of national and international events.

As attacks against Freemasonry multiplied in 19th century Europe, one race was repeatedly singled for a favorite target. Living as a minority almost everywhere, Jews perceived the Society as a way to achieve equality--with time they became the torchbearers of Freemasonry. And since much of the Masonic symbols, rituals and erudition were linked to Jewish mystic, the accusations cropped up whenever an economic crisis loomed or when the purported Judeo-Christian alliance fell out of favor

The Vatican, which saw any brotherhood other than its own (eg. the Knights of Columbus) as a major threat, was at the vanguard of anti-Freemason movements fanning the flames of the 'conspiracy' controversy whenever possible. But since Christendom had little influence in a predominantly Moslem Ottoman Empire, the expansion of Freemasonry among its cosmopolitan elite went on unhindered.

"In a characteristically tolerant Egypt, Freemasonry grew more out of fashion than conviction. It was more public than secret" comments Karim Wissa, an Egyptian diplomat who submitted a paper on local Freemasonry at Oxford. Like many of his brood and generation, Wissa can attest to at least one great-grandfather having been a District Grand Master.

"There were two kinds of Freemasons in Egypt in those days" says Wissa, "those like my landowning ancestors who adhered to the traditionalist English Freemasonry, and others who because of their fervent nationalism, joined the liberal French lodges headed in Egypt by Azhar luminaries Gamal al-Din al-Afghani and his disciple Mohammed Abdou. Interestingly, both men tended to address their companions as '*ikhawan al saffa wa khullan al wafa*'(sincere brethren and faithful companions)." [Note: this form of greeting emanated from a distinct school of thought linked to Islamic enlightenment going back to the Abbassid dynasty].

From Khedive Ismail to King Fouad, Egypt's monarchs accepted an honorary Grand Mastership. Yet none of Egypt's monarchs were physically initiated into the National Grand Orient of Egypt and their attendance was restricted to official portraits hanging

on the walls of Masonic lodges and halls. Other District Grand Masters included British High Commissioners (ambassadors) as well as several Sirdars--British commanders of the Egyptian army.

When Farouk ascended the throne, Freemasonry in Egypt was fast becoming "guilty by association," accused of entertaining strong Zionist affiliations (this accusation was subsequently refuted in a study conducted by a team of diplomats attached to the office of Foreign Affairs minister Dr. Mahmoud Fawzi). In the minds of traditionalists, the physical similarities between Masonic halls and B'nai B'rith lodges --a Judeo-Zionist organization fashioned upon the Masonic model- were far too obvious for anyone not to confound the two. And because they were seen as hand in glove it is doubtful the young king ever supported the Society as such.

Once WW2 came to an end, B'nai B'rith lodges in Cairo and Alexandria were summarily closed down

"Hadn't the analogous B'nai B'rith done everything in its power to turn Palestine into an exclusive homeland for the Jewish Diaspora?" exclaimed the growing number of Masonic detractors. Which is why following the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, it was open season for opponents of Freemasonry to pursue their claims that Masonic halls were subversive and dangerous, bent on undermining Arab nationalism and patriotism. This was almost a replay of the Vatican's anti-Freemasonry whisper campaigns propagated by in the middle of the last century and early this one

Anti-Freemason articles cropped up in the post-1948 Arab World "proving" the connection between Zionism and Freemasonry. In Egypt, arguments leveled against Freemasonry were selectively derived from fin de siècle freemasons George Zaidan and Shaheen Makarius. Both writers had commended contemporary businessmen and entrepreneurs, many of them Jewish, for their active role in reviving Egypt's capitalistic economy. Six decades later their statements were salaciously re-interpreted so that the businessmen and entrepreneurs of the past were portrayed as eager tools of a Judeo-Zionist collusion bent on dominating the regional economy

As the predominant conspiracy hypothesis takes credence in the Near East, the legality of Freemasonry is questioned and subsequently tabled on the Arab League's agenda. Jumping on the bandwagon books and articles on the subject began to surface. In a 660-page volume entitled "Freemasonry In The Arab World" Hussein Omar Hamada dedicates much of his book juggling Masonic conspiracy theories

With the post-1952 exodus of Egypt's *haute khawagerie*, lodges and Masonic temples had already lost many of their more affluent members. Some freemasons, whether out of fear or self-interest simply stopped turning up at the meetings so that even the all-Egyptian Star of the East had a hard time supporting itself.

On 4 April 1964, the Masonic Temple on Alexandria's Toussoun Street was shut down by order of the Ministry of Social Affairs. The reason: "Associations with undeclared agendas were incompatible with rules covering non profit organizations."

Sufficiently disturbing evidence for the State to be concerned about Freemasonry's political goals would turn up the following year in Damascus when master spy Eli Cohen was apprehended. Having eluded Syrian intelligence for many years posing as an Arab, it was discovered that Eli had been a freemason in Egypt where he was born.

Yet despite the 1964 decree declaring the demise of Freemasonry in Egypt, loud cries of "not so" can still be heard. And if one were to concede to Abou Islam Ahmed Abdallah

book "Freemasonry In Our Region" 1985), Freemasonry is alive and well in the guise of Rotary Clubs and other like-minded associations. "Having accomplished their earlier mission to establish a Jewish state, Masonic conspirators now intend to undermine Islam using charity work and community outreach as their tools" says Abdallah in his opening chapter. He then consecrates a substantial portion of his elusive writing equating the "new Masonic cancer" with Rotary and Lions organizations and with Jehovah's Witness, Freedom Now, Solar Tradition, New Age and several other "fringe" organizations.

Like it always has in the past, theories of sinister plots by ambiguous secret societies and associations still make headlines. So much so that books linking the British Royal family to Masonic Grand Masters and 'breaking news' detailing President Francois Mitterrand's secret relations with the Brotherhood have become common literature

For sure, as we enter a new millennium, Masonic handshakes and cranky rituals continue to excite certain elements within our society.

Former Masonic Halls in Cairo: Where were they located?

- Tiring Building on Attaba Square.
- Acher Building off Champolion Street (where Townhouse Gallery is located today).
- Freemasons Hall, Madrassa al-Fransawi Street, Mounira.
- Building at corner of Antekhana and Mahmoud Bassiouni Streets.