Conclusion

Freemasonry arrived in the Ottoman Empire at a time when familiar traditions and values were being severely tested. Identities seemed shaken and individual lives were interrupted by unforeseeable socio-political changes.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Ottomans were looking for a new perspective in order to consolidate their existence; a new way to strengthen social cohesion. This was a period when ideologies were invented, re-defined and refined; a time when new ideas found fertile ground to flourish. The Sublime Porte feared potential autonomy and separatism; it had lost territory in Europe and in North Africa to Western powers and its military and political weakness did not go unnoticed by the subjects of the Empire. To compound matters, they were confronted with the power of the other global players on a daily basis. Even the reactions of the different Ottoman governments to challenges from the outside made the people feel the substantial changes that were taking place to their lives and the loss of secure values. Ottoman bureaucracy was constantly in a state of flux, as was the educational system. Global trade and incorporations produced new winners, while others were forced to look for different places of employment. Due to technological innovations their skills were becoming redundant. Even dress codes had to be adapted.

When the inhabitants of Ottoman Syria were introduced to masonic rituals and tenets, they realised that this concept of brotherhood could relieve their distress. The Craft seemed perfectly suited to their own needs and purposes: to strengthen the individual by means of a newly defined unity. They were thereby introduced to a new form of inter-sectarian sociability, which enabled them to create networks in the form of lodges that were spread all over the region. However, the benefits of this idea were not only restricted to the Ottoman Empire: when freemasons left the area they were

able to identify with foreigners on account of their masonic membership. Moreover, when Ottomans were initiated in regular lodges outside the Empire, they were also able to enter lodges at home. Participation formed a common bond and thereby facilitated mobility. It helped to ease socio-political tensions by establishing a space where common values were more significant than the varying political outlooks and religious affiliations. Rather, Ottoman freemasons attempted to achieve what politics and religion were not able to manage: by establishing a masonic brotherhood, they united otherwise disparate minds. Unity meant strength. Chapters I and II demonstrated the situation of the Ottoman Empire and its dominant weakness. These chapters also examined the various characteristics and inherent peculiarities that made the brotherhood prosper even outside its traditional European playground.

Chapter III discussed how it was predominantly lodges in Egypt and those geographically closer to the Sublime Porte that were especially prone to mixing their masonic activities with political concerns. On the one hand, Syrian freemasons who migrated to Egypt, such as Jurji Zaidan, did not always find a masonic equivalent to the first lodges they joined, and as a result they left the brotherhood. On the other hand, Egyptian freemasons attending masonic meetings in Greater Syria soon became disappointed by the lack of a political atmosphere. The most outspoken of these Egyptian freemasons in Greater Syria was al-Afghani, who was himself Persian but had joined freemasonry in Egypt. He explicitly considered the fraternity to be a tool for changing political conditions. He became so disillusioned with the existing forms of freemasonry that he even founded his own lodge in Egypt in order to enforce his political aims.[796]

[796] Elie Kedourie, 'Young Turks, Freemasons, and Jews', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 7/1, (Jan. 1971); Kedourie, *Afghani and Abduh: An Essay on Religious Unbelief and Political Activism in Modern Islam*, (Frank Cass, London: 1966).

In Beirut, freemasons shared an academic or cultural background and Chapter IV indicates the overlapping activities of this new middle class in diverse organisations and societies. The first lodges were established on fertile ground and quickly started to inspire the foundation of new lodges. There was seemingly no intention to establish another society focussed solely on cultural issues; rather the idea was to include everyone who was willing to contribute to a better society in general. This was also the reason for the occasional collision of various lodges with masonic grand bodies. An overzealous attitude when expanding their masonic circles did not always conform to the official rules of freemasonry. However, with the inclusion of prestigious families, such as the Sursocks, Trads and the Yannis, the brotherhood held great appeal from its early years. With over 1500 members by the time of the Young Turk Revolution in 1908, freemasonry outnumbered any other social or political institution besides religious communities.

Hence, it is not surprising that the lodges soon began exerting a strong influence on areas outside Beirut. Chapter V shows how men from the cultural sector were mainly active in lodges on the mountains. Additionally, an emphasis is placed on the difficulty of pinpointing only *one* form of freemasonry in the region, as various forms of the brotherhood existed. Though they all sought to strive towards unity, intellectual emancipation and tolerance, the conflicting interpretations of freemasonry's aims and purposes did result in clashes. The detailed description of lodges on Mount Lebanon shows that freemasons did not always manage to exclude political and religious disputes. *Sunneen* Lodge was eventually prohibited from continuing its activities in 1927 after the Grand Lodge of Scotland examined the controversial nature of the lodge's meetings. It is doubtful whether *Sunneen* Lodge was ever in a position to exert political influence beyond the local sphere, but it is

likely that the Grand Lodge of Scotland withdrew its official support and recognition as a result of the fact that politics was a dominant issue during its existence.

Chapter VI examines lodge members in Tripoli, who had a similar socio-economic position. They were neither inclined to establish literary societies, nor did they threaten the current government through the publication or performance of subversive works. In Beirut, Western influence helped to create an atmosphere filled with innovative ideas in an attempt to unite traditional values and teachings with modern academic curricula. However, Tripoli was more conservative and also less involved in criticism of political conditions. The inhabitants of the city had other problems related to their daily lives. Interruptions caused by internal hostilities could cost them dearly, as they were mostly dependent on trade and therefore had to rely on networking. Freemasonry served as a tool to help bridge socio-cultural gaps, and even more significantly, could aid in bringing together men of different religious denominations for the very first time in Tripoli and El Mina. Masonic lodges were the first places in Greater Syria in which men gathered without a single focus, such as business, religion or politics. It was demonstrated how lodges in Tripoli and El Mina cooperated, which is indicated by the lodges' close relationships and overlapping membership. This research has established many hitherto unknown links between men whose single common denominator was their interest in freemasonry and the ideas it epitomised.

I believe it is pertinent to utilise Stefan Weber's description of cities as 'heterogeneous structures of social organisation', when analysing freemasonry. He defines the compositions of cities as 'shaped by shifts in individual and collective

identities', a characteristic which can be applied for freemasonry as well.[797] Even more than urban spaces, masonic lodges are subject to cultural dynamics and evolution. Masonic rituals, rules and traditions serve as props, but the realisation of the contents mainly depends on the individuals belonging to the lodge.

As showed in the last chapter, socially active groups and charitable groups existed in Tripoli and El Mina, but they complied with religious demarcations. At the end of the nineteenth century freemasonry was a novelty in the region and was able to overcome these limitations. Tripoli's freemasons crossed the borders and formed lodge communities; an extremely unusual phenomenon at the time in the region. The establishment of *El Mizhab* Lodge, *Kadisha* Lodge and all the subsequent lodges was seen as a first step in order to make further changes possible. Butrus al-Bustani, though not a mason, perfectly embodied the overall motto of Syrian freemasonry in one of his articles on society and the state of the Ottoman Empire, when he asked the people to put welfare and the interests of their Syrian fatherland above sectarianism and factionalism.[798]

The lodges examined in this thesis are proof of this attempt. It is no coincidence that most of the masons belonging to Syrian lodges during its first years were either the founders or members of social and charitable institutions. Yet, in many ways freemasonry acted as the missing cohesive link. As this thesis has shown, the fraternity provided this connection. It bridged the gap between religious congregations by spreading the ideas of fraternity and equality. While not complying with a specific political agenda, the lodges in Greater Syria were political insofar as

[797] Stefan Weber, 'Reshaping Damascus: social change and patterns of architecture in late Ottoman times', in: *From the Syrian Land to the States of Syria and Lebanon*, edited by Thomas Philipp, Christoph Schumann, (Orient Insitut, Beirut: 2004), p. 9.

[798] See also: Stephen Paul Sheehi, Inscribing the Arab Self: Butrus al-Bustani and Paradigms of Subjective Reform, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 27/1, (May 2000), pp. 7-24; Butrus Abu-Manneh, The Christians between Ottomanism and Syrian Nationalism: the Ideas of Butrus Al-Bustani, *IJMES*, vol. 11/3, (May 1980), pp. 287-304.

they influenced relationships between men who were politically and/or socio-culturally active. Religious communities may have been in competition, but their adherents nevertheless came together in the lodges using freemasonry as a basis for mutual understanding. It was the framework offered by masonry that offered the greatest benefits: overriding political or religious cleavages in order to establish a common denominator, whereby it was possible to find a shared level for communication and cooperation. They interpreted freemasonry as a way to promote social and moral emancipation, the welfare of the people and religious tolerance. Without doubt, it was also useful in terms of business and trade, as the masonic networks brought together influential men of various occupations. Their regular meetings were shaped by masonic traditions and rules, thereby enabling them to cooperate and produce results. Consequently, this also affected the non-masonic surroundings, with charitable deeds being the most visible confirmation of this success.

At least for a limited period, following the 1860s massacres and until the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, freemasonry certainly functioned as a forum that sought to foster a peaceful alliance in parts of Greater Syria. The increased cooperation among different religious communities can be considered as an indicator of the fraternity's success. Its steadily increasing popularity among Ottomans certainly suggests freemasonry's ability to work on problems overshadowed by religious or ideological conflicts.

On the other hand, especially if one takes into account Lebanon's recent history, there is an inherent vice in a movement whose rules and standards persist in non-interference in political and religious matters as from the outset it is restricted in its impact. As demonstrated in regard to European freemasonry, conflicts can reach a

point where the fraternity becomes helpless and has to yield to more powerful forces that dare to meddle in politics.

Much more research has to be done to deepen our knowledge about the way lodge meetings were used as vehicles to spread ideas, and how lodges developed and operated after the reign of Abdulhamid II. While the history of European and American lodges have been extensively studied, no such analysis of contemporary Syria and Lebanon has been made. Especially with regard to the period starting with the Young Turk Revolution, it is unclear how the various national lodges came into existence, or if networking was still one of the characteristic features in their mutual relationships, and how far nationalisation of lodges inside Ottoman Syria indeed succeeded. The further development of relations between Syria or Lebanon and other international masonic bodies also remains unstudied. Was there a new wave of activity by a new generation of masons in order to establish a form of Ottoman freemasonry?

Without future research, the field is left open for fundamentalist movements, which will seek to claim sovereignty over interpretation in order to create their own truths and blur our general perception of the dynamics of freemasonry in the Middle East. And though this thesis may only be a small contribution to the subject, I hope it can serve at least as a comprehensive first step for future academic research towards clarification rather than obfuscation.