Anglo-Turkish Society hybrid lecture, 19 May 2026, 6.00 pm (UK time)
Speaker: Muratcan Zorcu
Venue: Royal Anthropological Institute, 50 Fitzroy St, Fitzrovia, London W1T 5BT
Title: 'Beyond the Myth of Independent Journalism: Agah Efendi, Tercüman-ı Ahvâl, and British Influence'

The emergence of *Tercüman-ı Ahvâl* in 1860, founded by Agah Efendi and initially shaped by the intellectual contributions of İbrahim Şinasi, is universally celebrated in the Republican historiography as a turning point. It is traditionally heralded as the dawn of independent "opinion journalism" in the Ottoman Empire, representing a decisive break from state-sponsored news and the birth of a critical public sphere. However, this presentation challenges that deeply entrenched conventional narrative. By critically re-evaluating the operational and political dynamics of the era, the talk argues that the romanticized image of Agah Efendi as a purely independent pioneer obscures the complex realities of the mid-nineteenth-century Ottoman media landscape. Rather than a sudden leap into autonomous journalism, the early Turkish press was heavily entangled with bureaucratic patronage, factional state politics, and foreign diplomatic currents.

To demonstrate this, the presentation will draw a structural and political comparison between *Tercüman-ı Ahvâl* and its predecessors, *Ceride-i Havadis*, established by the English journalist William Churchill as well as the official newspaper, *Takvim-i Vekayi*. While historiography often positions Agah Efendi's enterprise as the antithesis of Churchill's government-subsidized paper, a closer examination reveals profound continuities. This talk will explore the underlying government connections, financial dependencies, and the overarching shadow of British influence that, in fact, shaped Agah Efendi's journalistic endeavours. Much like newspapers at that time, *Tercüman-ı Ahvâl* navigated a delicate balance, often functioning as an instrument for specific state factions or reflecting the dominant Anglo-Ottoman geopolitical alignments of the period. Ultimately, by peeling back the layers of the "independent journalism" myth, this presentation offers a nuanced re-evaluation of the Ottoman press. It demonstrates that the boundaries between independent intellectualism and state-aligned publishing were far more blurred than historically assumed.

Booking essential: https://muratcan-zorcu-presentation.eventbrite.co.uk

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Agah Efendi



Muratcan Zorcu is currently a doctoral candidate in the History Department at Koç University. His current research focuses on Agah Efendi, a prominent figure in the Ottoman bureaucracy and the pioneer of Turkish journalism. He holds a bachelor's degree in history from Boğaziçi University and a master's degree from the university's Atatürk Institute for Modern Turkish History. His master's thesis is titled "*Under Meḥmed 'Alī's Impact: Dispatching Students to Europe in the Reign of Maḥmūd II (1830–1839)*" His academic experience also includes working as a researcher on Dr. Adrien Zakar's project at the University of Toronto in 2023. Zorcu's articles have been featured in prominent publications, including the *Journal of Turkish Studies, Global Perspectives on Japan,* and *Yıllık: Annual of Istanbul Studies*.