

“BROTHER OF MY BROTHER” – THE RIGHT TO VISIT, REVISITED¹

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On 11 May 2013, the Grand Lodge of Turkey granted a conditional right to visit to Freemasons belonging to regular grand lodges which are not necessarily recognized. The condition requires the grand lodge of the visiting brother to be recognized by at least one grand lodge which in turn is recognized by the Grand Lodge of Turkey. The visit also requires the final approval of the Grand Master but, after all, with this decision, the Grand Lodge of Turkey officially accepts that “the brother of a brother is a brother” and as such, he could be given the right to visit Turkish lodges. This acceptance breaks the traditional equivalence between the right to visit and recognition by expanding the sphere of brethren who can visit Turkish lodges from recognized constitutions to regular ones.

At this point, it may be useful to recall that the regularity of a grand lodge is the fulfilment of a well-defined set of principles aiming to preserve the traditional values of Freemasonry, thus being an objective concept. On the other hand, recognition is a subjective privilege that two grand lodges may or may not grant to each other. During the last couple of decades, the world panorama of Freemasonry has exhibited an ever-growing disparity between regularity and recognition. While regularity is necessary for recognition, decisions regarding recognition typically involve additional subjective criteria which mostly contain political elements of a Masonic, or even non-Masonic, nature. As a result, regular grand lodges who are not in mutual recognition abound.

It is, in fact, this observation that motivated the said decision of the Grand Lodge of Turkey. The traditional equivalence between the right to visit and recognition is the product of a world in which decisions of recognition are based solely on regularity, hence the gap between recognition and regularity is non-existent. In such a world, setting the right to visit equivalent to recognition unites all regular brothers while successfully dissociating them from understandings of Freemasonry that are not compatible with the principles of regularity.

¹ The paper benefited from the comments of John Belton, Cevad Gürer, Erol Mark Houssein, Efe İnan, Selim Örs, Ahmet Şenkut, Emre Üge, and Okan Yunusoğlu. Of course, it is the author who is responsible from all possible mistakes.

On the other hand, setting the right to visit equivalent to recognition in a world where there is a severe gap between recognition and regularity has the ill effect of imposing barriers among regular brothers. Moreover, when the gap between recognition and regularity is somehow “political”, a dissociation based on “politics” is implied which, let alone having anything to do with regularity, is orthogonal to the core values of regular Freemasonry. The decision of the Grand Lodge of Turkey breaks the traditional equivalence between recognition and the right to visit, while making the right to visit almost² equivalent to regularity. The decision is a step towards removing the barriers between regular brethren and towards contributing to their mobility, while preserving the dissociation of regular Freemasonry from other non-traditional approaches to the Craft.

A major practice of the “brother of my brother” policy can occur when multiple regular grand lodges who are not in amity exist over the same territory. Italy (with the Grand Orient of Italy and the Regular Grand Lodge of Italy) and Greece (with the Grand Lodge of Greece and the National Grand Lodge of Greece) are two well-known cases in Europe. In South America, Brazil presents a case where there are territorial overlaps among regular grand lodges, and in the USA, the historical conflict with Prince Hall Grand Lodge still prevails in certain states. When there is a territorial conflict, the rule is to recognize only one of the many. With the “brother of my brother” policy, a grand lodge can keep its lodges open to all regular brethren of that territory, without violating the rule.³

The “brother of my brother” policy draws not only a position closer to the values of Masonic brotherhood, but also an acceptance of the reality of the world today. After all, Turkish brethren can already share ritual meetings with the “non-recognized” brethren covered by this policy. This typically occurs under a third grand lodge which recognizes both the Grand Lodge of Turkey and the grand lodge of the “non-recognized” brother. Moreover, due to the possibility of membership to more than one grand lodge, there are instances in which the “non-recognized” brother could visit Turkish lodges with the apron of his other grand lodge recognized by the Grand Lodge of Turkey.

² The qualification “almost” is needed, as Turkish Lodges are open to regular Freemasons subject to the fulfilment of certain additional conditions. However, the qualification “almost” also seems to be appropriate, as these additional conditions are far weaker than recognition.

³ To be sure, one can question this rule of recognizing in one territory only one of the multiple regular grand lodges who are not in amity. Nevertheless, the decision of the Grand Lodge of Turkey was taken under the prevalence of this rule.

For example, in Greece, the Grand Lodge of Turkey recognizes the Grand Lodge of Greece (hence not the National Grand Lodge of Greece) but a Turkish brother could attend the meeting of a lodge under the Grand Lodge of Ireland (which recognizes the National Grand Lodge of Greece) where he would enjoy the company of his brother who is a member of the National Grand Lodge of Greece. Furthermore, if this Greek brother is also a member of the Irish constitution, he could also visit Turkish lodges in this capacity.⁴ Yet, despite such realities, without the “brother of my brother” policy, the official discourse would state that Turkish brethren cannot share ritual meetings with the brethren of the National Grand Lodge of Greece.

Thus, the “brother of my brother” policy of the Grand Lodge of Turkey not only contributes to the association of all regular Freemasons but also maintains sincerity, one of the core values of Freemasonry, and relieves official discourse from the burden of being in contradiction with reality.

⁴ To prevent such instances from occurring, drastic measures would be required, such as not allowing Turkish brethren to visit a recognized jurisdiction when a visitor belonging to a non-recognized jurisdiction is present, and asking visitors to Turkish lodges to detail all masonic affiliations they do have. Such measures not only make no sense, but also cannot be enforced.