

BEWARE OF TURKISH DIPLOMATS BEARING GIFTS

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 Team Keghart **Editorial**, 13 December 2009

A Dec. 3 editorial in the "Toronto Star" prompts Keghart to revisit Turkish diplomatic tactics yet again. The editorial in Canada's largest-circulation daily claimed "a violent Kurdish insurgency in Turkey has abated in recent years" thanks to Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's "reaching out to heal old wounds". It then mentioned that villages are being allowed to revert to their Kurdish names, a university "has a green light to integrate Kurdish language studies in its curriculum", and that soon Kurds will be allowed to use their language in political affairs, etc. The editorial welcomed these changes. To further improve the status quo, it also called for the removal of the "draconian laws" that criminalize "insults" to the Turkish nation. 

Overall, readers were left with the impression that positive changes are taking place in Turkey, thanks to the European Union and the graciousness of Turkey's prime minister. Unfortunately, the Toronto newspaper is sadly mistaken in its assumptions. These changes are only secondary elements in an array of other factors that are not necessarily related to outside pressure which Turks viscerally abhor, like other people around the world do.

If the writer had left out the expression "nudged by the European Union" and elaborated more on why "the fierce 25-year struggle...by the Kurdistan Workers' Party" was waged in the first place, readers would have appreciated other aspects that have led to nascent reforms. Some important elements, such as the socio-economic changes in Turkey over the past couple of decades, the impact of a radical change in outlook of a new brand of intellectuals were left out.

The history of 19th century Ottoman Turkey is a classic example of how reforms were cynically proclaimed but not delivered. In several aspects the current regime is similar to that of the Ottoman sultans.

On the subject of the Kurds--who number 20 million by some estimates--it is worth mentioning that following the peace initiative announced by Erdogan in mid-November, eight Kurdish rebels were joined by 26 other Kurds, including refugees from an Iraqi camp for the "peace talks". The group was acting on orders by Abdullah Ocalan, the imprisoned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) leader. There was jubilation, and naturally a welcoming party took place, with people cheering and dancing. But what followed was bizarre. On the pretext that this was a demonstration in support of PKK, the government suspended the talks.

People who have followed Turkish government's handling of relations with minorities would call these standard-issue avoidance tactics intended not to fulfill promises. Thus whatever "goodwill" is offered by the government should be treated with extreme caution. The recent Erdogan-Gul-Davutoglu shenanigans regarding Turkey's relations with Armenia are another example that Ankara's "progressive" and "good neighbourly" motions should be approached with reservation. And what about Turkey's 180-degree turn regarding its relations with long-time ally Israel? Isn't it another example of Ankara's opportunism? Turkey's "abandonment" of its "little brother" Azerbaijan during

the Armenia talks is a further indication of Turkey's perennial guile and insincerity.

It is no wonder that Cengiz Aktar, noted Hurriyet columnist, wrote recently "goodwill may not be enough in this tense period. No solid action has yet been taken. 'Dogs bark but the caravan goes on' type of approach may not be sufficient this time as 'dogs' may do great harm to the caravan." Aktar went on warning, "we hear nowadays that there has never been a civil war in these lands but that if things continue as they are there might be one between Turks and Kurds." He also reminded his readers that Turkey has failed to draw lessons from the atrocities of the past, including the looting and driving out of non-Muslim minorities by the Union and Progress government, the "periodic pogroms Alevis were subjected to", pointing out the "ghosts are back again".

As if to complicate matters further, on Dec. 11, Turkey's Constitutional Court unanimously delivered a ruling, banning the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party for alleged links with the outlawed PKK. Moreover, the party's founders were banned from politics for five years. They were banned from establishing, joining, administering or supervising any other political party for the duration.

Armenians are following these developments with great interest. It is not off the mark to state that a good number of them believe that true democracy is the only key to resolving not only the Kurdish "problem", but also the Armenian question. Declarations of progressive Turkish intellectuals and their supporters provide some hope of pushing Turkey to the 21st century. However, it is way too early to conclude that things are really changing.

Turkey's obduracy, recalcitrance, inflexibility are not just diplomatic characteristics but are cultural. Turkey's idol, Ataturk, denounced Pan-Turanism and said Turkey should forget that unrealistic dream, but a significant sector of the country continues to talk about it to this day.

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