ERDOGAN ADMITS TURKEY PRACTICED ETHNIC CLEANSING

Posted on May 27, 2009 by keghart.com

Category: Opinions

Harut Sassounian, Publisher, The California Courier, 28 May 2009

In a daring statement, Prime Minister Rejeb Erdogan admitted for the first time, that the expulsion from Turkey of tens of thousands of ethnic Greeks in the last century was a "fascist" act, Reuters reported.

Harut Sassounian, Publisher, The California Courier, 28 May 2009

In a daring statement, Prime Minister Rejeb Erdogan admitted for the first time, that the expulsion from Turkey of tens of thousands of ethnic Greeks in the last century was a "fascist" act, Reuters reported.

Some commentators viewed Erdogan's remarks as a reference to the expulsion of 1.5 million ethnic Greeks from Turkey to Greece in 1923. The large-scale population exchange between the two countries also included the transfer of more than 500,000 ethnic Turks from Greece to Turkey. Other observers thought that Erdogan was referring to the pillaging of thousands of Greek shops and houses by Turkish mobs in Istanbul on Sept. 6-7, 1955, following the spread of false reports that Atatürk's house in Thessaloniki, Greece had been burned down.

Beyond the expulsion of Greeks, Erdogan made an indirect reference to the tragic fate of other ethnic groups, such as Armenians, in Turkey. "For years, those of different identities have been kicked out of our country.... This was not done with common sense. This was done with a fascist approach," Erdogan said on May 23, during the annual congress of the Justice and Development Party, held in the western province of Düzce.

"For many years," Erdogan continued, "various facts took place in this country to the detriment of ethnic minorities who lived here. They were ethnically cleansed because they had a different ethnic cultural identity. The time has arrived for us to question ourselves about why this happened and what we have learned from all of this. There has been no analysis of this right up until now. In reality, this behavior is the result of a fascist conception. We have also fallen into this grave error."

The Turkish Prime Minister's candid remarks were harshly criticized by opposition parties. Onur Oymen, vice president of the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) said that associating Turkey's history with terms like fascism based on hearsay was not right. He also said that no Turkish citizen had ever been expelled because of his or her ethnic background. Oktay Vural of the opposition MHP party added: "Erdogan's words are an insult to the Turkish nation."

In sharp contrast, liberal Turkish commentators praised Erdogan for his conciliatory remarks: "For the first time you have a prime minister who wants to admit that mistakes were made in the treatment of religious minorities. This is historic," wrote journalist Sami Kohen in Milliyet. "But whether this rhetoric will be followed with deeds, remains to be seen." Hürriyet Daily News added: Erdogan's speech was historic; it was the first time that a high official accepted there have been unlawful and undemocratic

practices against minorities in the past.

This sentiment was echoed by Prof. Halil Berktay in Vatan newspaper: "That statement was the most courageous thing ever said by Erdogan." Baskin Oran, another academic well-known for his liberal views, told Star newspaper that he was "proud of a prime minister who denounces ethnic and religious cleansing."

CNN-Turk News Director Ridvan Akar was more skeptical about Erdogan's true intentions. He wrote in Vatan: "Minority rights as well as those of religious foundations are a structural problem within the Turkish state. Of course, Erdogan has taken a step forward with this declaration. But the sincerity of his words will depend on facts to back them up, such as the restitution of rights to those who have been expelled, the return of confiscated properties, or compensation."

The Prime Minister's statement is encouraging, if it is an indication that Turkey's leaders have finally decided to face the ugly chapters of their country's past.

However, it would be wrong to draw overly optimistic conclusions from this single statement. Erdogan has made similar comments about the Kurds in Turkey, only to have their hopes dashed by taking unexpected repressive measures against them.

The fact is that Erdogan is not the master of his political domain. The "fascists" he attacks are not buried in an Ottoman historical grave, but are alive and well in Turkish society and occupy the highest echelons of the military and judiciary.
Yet, Erdogan is politically shrewd enough to realize that his condemnation of fascism would resonate at home and in the West, and win him accolades and support against his powerful domestic opponents.

Erdogan's battle against the ghosts of the Turkish past is in fact a fight for his political survival against those in today's Turkey who view him and his Islamic party with deep suspicion, and are determined to counter his every move, ultimately seeking his downfall from power.