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Guest Editorial

A Cry of Help By the Assyrians

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Posted GMT 9-27-2005 15:17:54

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I have been awed by Assyrian art twice: The first occasion was while standing before a huge ancient stone relief depicting a war scene exhibited in the British Museum during my university years. The second was a collection of silver ornaments called 'telkari' made by fine threads of silver. They looked like metal embroidery of the finest kind. Decades later I visited Mardin and Midyat to discover that long after the disappearance of the Assyrian Empire, the fine masonry they have left behind had lived on.

Indeed, the heirs of one of the magnificent civilizations of Mesopotamia are the Assyrian citizens of Turkey. I include myself here too, the elite city folk of Turkey know very little about them, indeed, nor have they read anything in our history or citizenship books at school about them, either. I felt ashamed of my ignorance and I still feel that as an academic and an enlightened citizen of Turkey I owe a duty to demonstrate some awareness of the needs and expectations to this talented -- and one of the most peaceful -- groups of the republic.

During each of my travels to the southeastern provinces of Turkey I witnessed the shrinking of the Assyrian population. Some villages have sought refuge in Europe as towns shed their Assyrian inhabitants by the thousands. Most of those who wanted to remain in the country moved to national metropolises, especially to Istanbul where their Christian creed was less visible and their craft (mostly gold and silversmiths) was rewarded.

They were neglected by officialdom because they did not fit into the official identity of citizenship defined as "Turkish in ethnicity and Sunni Muslim in religion." Although they possessed the two other components of the official identity that are "secular" and "obedient to the state," their Christian creed set them apart from the mainstream body of "trusted citizens." Left alone, they did not enjoy the protection of official bodies. Reckless Kurds inspired to lawlessness by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) usurped their property and deterred them from staying on by destroying their crops as well as issuing outright threats on their lives.

I am a personal witness of this sad phenomenon: A powerful and prominent Kurdish figure in the Mardin area known for his righteousness is trusted with the trusteeship of the property of many Assyrians. The title deeds of dozens of expensive properties is transferred over to this man in return for his word that upon the death of their legal owners they will be handed over to their scions/heirs. What a pity for the citizens of a country who has to take refuge in the honesty of a few selected individuals rather than being protected by the institutions and officials to whom they bear allegiance.

However, lately it was very refreshing to hear and see that some of the Assyrians were coming back after decades of asylum in Western countries, at least to die in their own land or to spend a few peaceful years after the violence subsided. After all, this is their country. However, some have faced severe difficulties in recovering their property from loyal Kurdish village guards who had been instrumental in neutralizing the PKK in certain trouble spots. Some found it hard to obtain permission to build new residences to a much higher standard than the locals liked. Nevertheless, like rare and shy birds, they came back and brought gaiety to the gloomy Southeast, which had been a war zone for decades. Now that terrorism has been artificially resumed by the PKK to disrupt the peace and stability of the region and the country as a whole, Assyrians may shy away once again, thus leaving the region to militancy and the rule of force.

In the face of this danger they are appealing to every receptive heart and every listening ear for protection and the respect they most definitely deserve.

The situation is much worse to the south of the border, with Assyrians in Iraq crying out for help. Here are their own words concerning their concerns and expectations for the non-Arab and non-Kurdish groups:

"The Turkmen alone cannot survive against the aggressive Kurdish oppression. Turkmen politicians are in danger of their lives and they are being kidnapped. Kurdish militias and peshmergas oppress and threaten Turkmen businesses.

"The Assyrians are under even more aggressive political conditions than the Turkmen. There is the Nineveh Plain region with about 300,000 Assyrians, Shabaks, Yezidis and Turkmen. These people categorically refuse to be 'Kurdified.' This region is huge but the Kurds are trying very hard to incorporate it in a future 'Kurdistan or northern Iraq. It's still not under their administration and control officially. That is also why the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) prevented ballot boxes reaching this region during the previous elections!

"What the Kurds are doing in this region is a great crime. KDP offices are being built in even in the smallest villages; clerics are being bribed; civilians are being killed and alternative political parties of other peoples are being oppressed in a very aggressive

way.

"Turkey must support the Assyrians who do not want to be divided into Chaldean, Syriac and Assyrian, as is written in the present Constitution. They wish to be referred to as ChaldoAssyrian, as it was in the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) representing all. "If Turkey only supports the Turkmen but refuses to support the Assyrians, Shabaks and Yezidis in northern Iraq, then a future Kurdistan in northern Iraq and Southeast Turkey will be a fact; even if the PKK is neutralized by Turkey, the United States and the European Union."*

I have not added a word to this analysis and cry for help. Anyone with some sense and conscience should heed the words above if they really want peace and stability based on equality and justice in a region that could be the fuse of the next world war, not fought with nuclear weapons but with hatred and a militant ideology that is no less dangerous and devastating.

Dogu Ergil is professor of political sociology at Ankara University in Turkey and president and director of the Center for the Research of Societal Problems (TOSAV), an Ankara-based nongovernmental organization created to address the tensions between Turks and Kurds. The author of numerous books on Turkish-Kurdish relations and reconciliation, including Turkey's Encounter with Herself (1997) and The Eastern (Kurdish) Question (1995), he was a visiting fellow at the International Forum for Democratic Studies in 1999-2000.

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