

THE CONTINUING TRAGEDY OF TURKEY

Notes for Hon. David Kilgour, J.D.

Dinner meeting of Inter-cultural Dialogue

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It cannot be overstated how much I like and admire the people and country of Turkey.

Sadly, many democrats across the world have felt obliged to criticize the Erdogan government in recent years for violating so many precepts of democratic/rule of law governance. Here are some of the links to numerous pieces on related topics from my website (www.david-kilgour.com):

- [The Faces of Present-Day Persecution](#), By David Kitz | The Leveller, October 17, 2018
- [Fleeing oppression in Turkey](#), By Jennifer Campbell | Diplomat & International Canada, October 7, 2018
- [ERDOGAN'S TURKEY: THE WORLD'S BIGGEST PRISON FOR JOURNALISTS](#), BY JOANNA HONG | Newsweek, September 18, 2018
- [Turkey: Continued Violation of Non-Derogable Rights After Lifting of State of Emergency | Joint Written Statement to the 39th Session of the UN Human Rights Council](#), Lawyers' Rights Watch Canada,
- [TURKEY'S ERDOGAN WANTS TO CRUSH THE KURDS AND RECREATE THE OTTOMAN WORLD](#), BY JONATHAN WACHTEL AND ALBERT WACHTEL | Newsweek
- [Turkey Today](#), By David Kilgour | New Delhi Times, April 3, 2018
- [The Roots of the Turkish Crisis](#), BY SOPHIA PANDYA, Democracy Journal, WINTER 2018
- [Erdogan Adversary Begins 250-Mile Protest March in Turkey](#), By PATRICK KINGSLEY, The New York Times, JUNE 15, 2017
- [The Turkey I no longer know](#), By Fethullah Gulen, The Washington Post, May 15, 2017

The last piece cited is by Fethullah Gulen, founder of the Hizmet movement. Rev. Bryan Fulwider, having visited Mr. Gulen in the United States, described him as the “Martin

Luther King Jr. of the Muslim world”. Fulwider co-hosts a national radio show on the American NPR from Florida with a rabbi and an Imam.

Permit me to repeat a few things I wrote last year:

For almost a century, Turkey has been an internationally-admired Muslim-majority democracy. Under its World War 1 hero and founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Turks obtained full independence in 1923, and later the rule of law, universal literacy, separation of state and religion, rights for women and NATO membership...

Tragically, Erdoğan has since severely undermined Turkey’s democracy and rule of law. In 2013, when a corruption scandal broke involving him and his cabinet, no-one was charged. Judges, prosecutors and police were quickly re-assigned. Fethullah Gülen, the cleric and founder of the Gülen Movement/Hizmet (GM), who had supported him when they both sought membership in the EU and further democratization of Turkey, broke with him over corruption and has since been declared “a terrorist” by Erdoğan...

A packed forum on Turkey hosted by the Anatolian Heritage Federation was held (last year) within Canada’s Parliament.

Alex Neve, Secretary General of Amnesty International (AI) Canada, noted that Taner Kılıç, president of AI Turkey, remains in prison for allegedly supporting the so-called “terrorist organization FETÖ” (of Gulen), adding, “(AI) in its 57 years never experienced anything like this before...anyone can be detained and arrested for having a communication app Bylock or sending their child to a Gülen Movement affiliated school or having a bank account in Bank Asya...Turkey (now has) the highest number of jailed journalists ...Why silence from Canada and the rest of the world?”

Government MP Michael Levitt, chair of the House of Commons human rights sub-committee, said: “Families are torn apart. Academics, media professionals, students, and... ordinary people ... are being ... (detained) without charge...The repression of democracy (is) something that (concerns us deeply) ...”

Green Party leader Elizabeth May declared, “I am horrified by the behaviour of the Turkish government... This has not been raised by the United Nations or traditional allies... we as allies of Turkey cannot accept this behavior to go on; we need to be speaking out more forcefully”.

According to a report issued by then UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Al Hussein:

“The numbers are just staggering: nearly 160,000 people arrested during an 18-month state of emergency; 152,000 civil servants dismissed, many totally arbitrarily; teachers, judges and lawyers dismissed or prosecuted; journalists arrested, media outlets shut down and websites blocked... Turkish authorities reportedly detained some 100 women

who were pregnant or had just given birth, mostly on the grounds that they were ‘associates’ of their husbands, who are suspected of being connected to terrorist organizations. Some were detained with their children and others violently separated from them. This is simply outrageous, utterly cruel, and surely cannot have anything whatsoever to do with making the country safer”.

Their goal appears to be to remove all elements of Atatürk’s secular state, which Turks have defended with their lives over the past nine decades. Turkey’s global friends can only hope that Erdoğan will accept the real lessons of the July 15 attempted coup, instead of terming it a “gift from God”, and move back towards national reconciliation, democracy and the rule of law.

Here are some reflections by retired Ottawa teacher David Kitz, who visited Athens last year on behalf of the Hizmet movement:

By David Kitz

What do the faces of present-day persecution look like? They look remarkably like the faces of the boy and girl pictured here.



After fleeing arrest in their hometown in Turkey, this family risked their lives in a daring midnight dash across a rain-swollen river that marks the border with Greece. Currently, these children live with their mother and four other refugee families in a crowded apartment in Athens. They subsist on funds sent to them by their father, who has gone ahead of them to start a new life in Canada, working as an Uber driver in Ottawa.

So what heinous crime did they commit? Their mother was a teaching assistant at a Hizmet private school. That was their crime.

The Hizmet movement is a Sufi Muslim religious sect that advocates for peace and interfaith dialogue. Hizmet means service, and the movement has been particularly active in the field of education.

Hizmet was founded by [Fethullah Gülen](#), and he initially supported Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's election and rise to power in the early 2000s. However, by 2013 Gülen had withdrawn his support as corruption, rights abuses and strongarm tactics within the Erdoğan regime became evident. (Details in our companion piece, "[Turkey's Democratic Suicide](#)").

Following the [coup](#) attempt of July 15, 2016, all Hizmet schools were shut down by order of President Erdoğan. But the Turkish government was not content with simply closing the schools, firing the teachers and revoking the teachers' licenses. In the weeks that followed, Erdoğan blamed Gülen for the coup, and the government began to systematically arrest and imprison all Hizmet-associated teachers.

On a trip to Athens in late June of this year, I met with several Turkish refugees and heard their first-hand accounts.

Most of the refugees who escape to Greece from Turkey have been fugitives in their homeland for more than a year. Often, to avoid arrest, they have been secretly staying with relatives or friends. But their presence is a burden that endangers the lives of their hosts. Since there is a nationwide warrant for their arrest, they are unemployable.

They see escape to Greece as the only way out of the predicament in which they find themselves. Frequently, they hire human smugglers to act as guides to avoid arrest.

The Turkish refugees fall into three broad categories: journalists, teachers and intellectuals.

Upon arriving in Athens, my first interview was with a senior-level journalist with Zaman, the biggest daily newspaper in Turkey. In 2013, Zaman reported that truckloads of armaments were crossing from Turkey into Syria in support of ISIS fighters.

The Erdoğan government's response was swift. They did not want this dirty secret revealed to the world. The newspaper's assets were seized and the journalists were arrested...

But my most gripping interviews were with teachers, some of whom were imprisoned for a year or more, with as many as 28 men crammed into a cell.

The leader of a Hizmet-affiliated teachers' union told me that after the coup attempt, the 30,000 members of his union lost their jobs, and then they were systematically arrested and imprisoned for being members of a terrorist group.

For most of his career, this man worked as a teacher to deaf children. Now the Turkish government sees him as a terrorist.

On my last day in Athens, I had breakfast with another family with three children. For the safety of family members who remain in Turkey, they wished to remain anonymous for this story. The husband had been a teacher in Turkey. After a delicious

meal they began to tell a shocking account of government-sponsored terror and torture. It all centred on their youngest child, a daughter.

After the coup, in order to avoid arrest, the family went into hiding. But the wife soon realized that she was pregnant. Under normal circumstances she would see her doctor for prenatal care. But a doctor's visit would reveal her identity and trigger her husband's arrest. The pregnancy proceeded normally, but in the final weeks she experienced bleeding. Fearing that she would lose the baby, she made the fateful decision to see a doctor. A caesarean section was scheduled for the following week.

The procedure went well, resulting in the birth of the healthy baby girl. But the mother awoke in the recovery room surrounded by four male police officers who demanded that she sign a confession that she was a member of a terrorist organization — the Hizmet movement.

The mother refused to sign. What followed was 36 hours of intense interrogation, intimidation and torture. At one point the police insisted that she be taken in for further questioning.

Despite the pleas of the doctor and medical staff, the mother was forcefully removed from the hospital. Her stitches were ripped as she was transported in a paddy wagon to the police station.

Later they threatened to transport her in this condition to a city five hours away, where the warrant for her husband's arrest was originally issued. Fortunately, the direct intervention of a courageous member of the Turkish Parliament prevented further abuse.

It was a delight to see mother and baby united and healthy with the whole family safe and sound in Athens. They too made a daring midnight escape from Turkey to Greece.

Dr. Markos Karavias, the head of the Greek Asylum Service, explained the difficulties that Greece faces in accommodating this new wave of asylum seekers. Over a million refugees from the Syrian conflict poured into Greece between 2015 and 2017. But a second wave of Turkish asylum seekers is now arriving as Turkish nationals flee arrest by the authoritarian Erdoğan regime.

“Our greatest need is for competent Greek/Turkish translators, so these new arrivals can get a proper hearing to determine their eligibility for refugee status,” Dr. Karavias commented.

What has been the Greek response? In many respects, it has been identical to our federal government's response. When refugees land on Greek soil, they contact the Greek police so they can be registered as asylum seekers and begin the long wait for their case to be heard. In the meantime, they need housing and gainful employment.

The responses of the Canadian and Greek government are identical because both countries are bound by the 1951 International Convention on Refugees. But make no mistake — Greece and Canada are in a very different situation. The Greek unemployment rate sits at 20 per cent compared with Canada's 6 per cent. Greece is a

small, densely populated country while Canada is able to absorb larger numbers of refugees.

In the first six months of this year, just over 10,000 asylum seekers have arrived in Canada. Some say this is a crisis. Others believe it is a tempest in a teapot that a few politicians on the right are exploiting for political gain.

Former cabinet minister and international human rights advocate David Kilgour sees this 'crisis' differently. "For a country as big as Canada, this is a small problem, and it comes with a silver lining. We need more people, not less. Many of these refugees – the Turkish refugees fleeing the tyrant Erdoğan – are highly educated. They appreciate democracy and human rights."

As for those two refugee children that I met in Athens, they and their mother are still waiting to be reunited with their dad in Ottawa. Will Canada open the door or slam it shut?

Thank you for listening.