

A shameful campaign

Attempts to intimidate a Turk who speaks out about the Genocide. By Taner Akçam

For many who challenge their government's official version of events, slander, e-mailed threats, and other forms of harassment are all too familiar. As a former Amnesty International prisoner of conscience in Turkey, I should not have been surprised. But my recent detention at the Montreal airport - apparently on the basis of anonymous insertions in my Wikipedia biography - signals a disturbing new phase in a Turkish campaign of intimidation that has intensified since the November 2006 publication of my book, *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility*. At the invitation of the McGill University Faculty of Law and Concordia University, I flew from Minneapolis to Montreal on Friday, February 16, to lecture on *A Shameful Act*. As the Northwest Airlines jet touched down at Trudeau International Airport about 11:20 a.m., I assumed I had plenty of time to get to campus for the 5:00 p.m. event. Nearly four hours later, I was still at the airport, detained without any explanation.

"Where are you going? Where are you staying? How many days are you staying here?" asked the courteous officer from Citizenship and Immigration Canada. "Do you have a return ticket? Do you have enough money with you?"

As the border control authorities were surely aware, I travel frequently to Canada: three or four trips a year since 2000, most recently with my daughter in October 2006, just before the publication of *A Shameful Act*. Not once in all that time had I been singled out for interrogation.

"I'm not sure myself why you need to be detained," the officer finally admitted. "After making some phone calls, I'll let you know."

While he was gone, my cell phone rang. The friend who had arranged to pick me up at the airport had gotten worried when I failed to emerge from Customs. I explained the situation as well as I could, asking him to inform my hosts, the Centre for Human Rights and Legal Pluralism at McGill and the Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies at Concordia, that I might be late for the lecture. The Zoryan Institute and the Armenian Students' Associations of Montreal, co-presenters of the event, would also need to be updated.

The immigration officer returned with a strange request: could I help him figure out why I was being detained? You're the one detaining me, I was tempted to say. If you don't know the reason, how do you expect me to know? You tell me. It was like a scene from Atom Egoyan's *Ararat*. I knew better than to challenge him, giving the impression that I had something to hide.

"Let me guess," I answered. "Do you know who Hrant Dink was? Did you hear about the Armenian journalist who was killed in Istanbul?" He hadn't.

"I'm a historian," I explained. "I work on the subject of the Armenian Genocide of 1915. There's a very heavy campaign being waged by extreme nationalist and fascist forces in Turkey against those individuals who are critical of the events that occurred in 1915. Hrant Dink was killed because of it. The lives of people like me are in danger because of it. Orhan Pamuk, Turkey's Nobel Laureate, couldn't tolerate the attacks against him and had to leave the country. Many intellectuals in Turkey are now living under police protection." The officer took notes.

"In connection with these attacks there has been a serious campaign against me in the U.S.," I went on. "I know that the groups running this campaign are given directives and are controlled by the

Turkish diplomats. They spread propaganda stating that I am a member of a terrorist organization. Some rumors to that effect must have reached you." The officer continued to write.

"For your information, in 1976, while I was a master's degree student and teaching assistant at Middle East Technical University, I was arrested for articles I had written in a journal and sentenced to eight years and nine months in prison. I later escaped to Germany, where I became a citizen. The Turkish criminal statute that was the basis for my prosecution, together with similar laws, was repealed in 1991. I travel to Turkey freely now and went there most recently for Hrant Dink's funeral."

The officer finished his notes. "I'm sorry, but I have to make some more phone calls," he said, and left.

My cell phone rang again. It was McGill legal scholar Payam Akhavan, an authority on human rights and genocide, who was to have introduced my lecture. Apologizing for my situation, Prof. Akhavan let me know that he had contacted the offices of Canadian Minister of Public Safety Stockwell Day and Secretary of State for Multiculturalism and Canadian Identity Jason Kenney. Bishop Bagrat Galstanian, Primate of the Diocese of the Armenian Church of Canada, also called to confirm that he too had been in touch with Secretary Kenney's office. I was going to be released. About 3:30 p.m. the officer returned with a special one-week visa. Upon my insistence that I had a right to know exactly why I had been detained, he showed me a sheet of paper with my photograph on top and a short block of text, in English, below.

I recognized the page at once. The photo was a still from the 2005 documentary *Armenian Genocide: 90 Years Later*, a co-production of the University of Minnesota Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies and Twin Cities Public Television. A series of outtakes from the film, originally posted on the CHGS website, could be found on the popular Internet video site YouTube and elsewhere in cyberspace. The still photo and the text beneath it comprised my biography in the English-language edition of Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia which anyone in the world can modify at any time. For the last year - most recently on Christmas Eve, 2006 - my Wikipedia biography had been persistently vandalized by anonymous "contributors" intent on labeling me as a terrorist. The same allegations had been repeatedly scrawled, like gangland graffiti, as "customer reviews" of *A Shameful Act* and my other books at Amazon.com.

It was unlikely, to say the least, that a Canadian immigration officer found out that I was coming to Montreal, took the sole initiative to research my identity on the Internet, discovered the archived Christmas Eve version of my Wikipedia biography, printed it out seven weeks later on February 16, and showed it to me - voilà! - as a result.

The fact is that my upcoming lecture had been publicized well in advance in the Canadian print and broadcast media. An announcement had even been inserted in Wikipedia five days before my arrival. Moreover, two Turkish-American websites hostile to my work - the 500-page *Tall Armenian Tale*, and the 19,000-member Turkish Forum listserv - had been hinting for months that my "terrorist" activities ought to be of interest to American immigration authorities. It seemed far more likely that one or more individuals had seized the opportunity to denounce me to the Canadians. Although I was forced to cancel two radio interviews, I made it to the McGill campus in time to lecture on *A Shameful Act*.

* * *

On Sunday, February 18, before boarding my return flight to Minneapolis, I was detained for another hour. It was obvious that the American customs and border authorities knew what had happened at the adjacent offices on the Canadian side. "Mr. Akçam," I was gently advised, "if you

don't retain an attorney and correct this issue, every entry and exit from the country is going to be problematic. We recommend that you do not travel in the meantime and that you try to get this information removed from your customs dossier."

The well-meaning American customs official could hardly have known the extent of the problem. Wikipedia and Amazon are but two examples. Allegations against me, posted mainly by the Assembly of Turkish American Associations (ATAA), Turkish Forum, and Tall Armenian Tale, have been copy-pasted and recycled in innumerable websites and e-groups ever since I arrived in America. By now, for example, my name in close proximity to the English word "terrorist" turns up in well over 10,000 web pages.

The first salvo in this campaign came in response to the English translation of my essay, "The Genocide of the Armenians and the Silence of the Turks." In a sensational March 19, 2001, commentary from the ATAA Turkish Times ("From Terrorism to Armenian Propagandist: The Taner Akçam Story"), one Mustafa Artun introduced me to Turkish-Americans as a mastermind of terrorist violence, including the assassinations of American and NATO military personnel. Among the next salvos was an announcement from Turkish Forum: "For the attention of friends in Minnesota.... Taner Akçam has started working in America.... It is expected that the conferences about so-called Genocide will increase in and around Minnesota. Please follow the Armenian (Taner Akçam's) activities very closely." My contact information at home and at work was conveniently provided "in case people would like to send their 'greetings' to this traitor." Soon enough, harassing e-mails were sent anonymously to my employer, the University of Minnesota, and to me personally. With the publication of *A Shameful Act*, the circle began to close in. On November 1, 2006, the City University of New York Center for the Humanities organized a gathering at the CUNY Graduate Center to introduce my book. Before I rose to speak, unauthorized leaflets bearing an assault rifle, skull, and the communist hammer and sickle were distributed in the hall. In rhetoric obviously inspired by Mustafa Artun's commentary, I was labeled as a "former terrorist leader" and a fanatic enemy of America who had organized "attacks against the United States" and was "responsible for the death of American citizens."

As soon as I finished my lecture, a pack of some 15 to 20 individuals, who had strategically positioned themselves in small groups throughout the hall, tried to break up the meeting. Brandishing pictures of corpses (either Muslims killed by revenge-seeking Armenians in 1919 or Kurdish victims of Iraqi gas attacks on the town of Halabja in 1988), they loudly demanded to know why I had not lectured on the deaths of "a million Muslims."

Shouting and swearing in Turkish and English, they completely disrupted the discussion in the lecture hall and the book-signing session nearby. I was verbally assaulted as a "terrorist-communist" and lashed with the vilest Turkish profanities. Two individuals dogged my footsteps from the podium to the elevator doors, howling, "We are the soldiers of Alparslan Türkeş!" (A Turkish politician who was arrested in 1944 for spreading Nazi propaganda, Türkeş later founded the Nationalist Movement Party) The security guards surrounding me had to intervene when I was physically attacked.

A month later, on December 4, I was scheduled to speak at another New York event, a symposium at Yeshiva University's Cardozo School of Law on "Denying Genocide: Law, Identity and Historical Memory in the Face of Mass Atrocity." As if to illustrate this very theme, a 4,400-word letter was sent to the law school dean and faculty three weeks in advance, urging the cancellation of the symposium and labeling me as "a propagandistic tool of the Armenians."

The Turkish Forum mobilized an e-mail campaign against the "Taner Akcam conference." Members were also urged to attend the symposium and a "pre-meeting for Turks," coordinated by Ibrahim Kurtulus.

I forwarded this information to the event organizers with a request that appropriate precautions be taken. Yeshiva was concerned. An organizer who had attended the CUNY gathering on November 1 assured me that security would be increased.

As a pre-emptive step, the event committee informed the Turkish Consulate that the law school symposium was intended to be general in scope, comparative and scholarly in approach, and not focused on either Taner Akçam or Turkey. They made it clear that any disruption similar to the CUNY incident would not put Turkey in a favorable light. A Turkish consular official disavowed any government involvement in the disruption at CUNY, which he attributed to "the actions of civilians" in grassroots organizations. There was nothing the Consulate could do about them, he said. The organizers stressed that they intended to take extra security precautions and that the Consulate ought to think hard about what would happen if the symposium was invaded and its participants attacked.

Just one day before the symposium there was another phone conversation between the Turkish consular official and the organizers. He assured them that no disruption would take place and only two or three Turkish representatives would attend.

The government kept its word. The symposium was peaceful and no leaflets were distributed. The Turkish consular official attended with ATAA President-elect Gunay Evinch, both of whom were scrupulously polite. It was as though three intense weeks of mobilization had never happened. For many Turkish intellectuals, freedom of speech has become a struggle in North America as well as in our native country. What is happening to me now could happen to any scholar who dissents from the official state version of history.

Since my return from Montreal, the Canadian immigration authorities have refused to say exactly why I was detained. As a result, I am unable to face my accusers or examine whatever "evidence" may be filed against me. Although I have formally requested access both to my Canadian and American dossiers - a process that could take months - I have had to cancel all international appearances. Meanwhile, my Wikipedia biography and Amazon book pages remain open to malicious insertions at any time.

Nevertheless, my American book tour continues under tightened security. Although it is stressful and very sad to have to lecture under police protection, I have no intention of cancelling any of my domestic appearances. After all, the United States is not the Republic of Turkey. The Turkish authorities whether directly or through their grassroots agents have no right to harass scholars exercising their academic freedom of speech at American universities. Throughout my life I have learned in unforgettable ways the worth of such freedom, and I intend to use it at every opportunity.