

A Shameful Campaign

by Taner Akçam

For many who challenge their government's official version of events, slander, emailed 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 11:00 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.* However, 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 US," 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 8 years and 9 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'd 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 Web site, 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 as a result.

The fact was 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 Web sites 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 American Turkish Associations (ATAA), Turkish Forum, and Tall Armenian Tale, have been copy-pasted and recycled throughout innumerable Web sites 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 ten thousand 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”), I was introduced to Turkish-Americans as a mastermind of terrorist violence, including the assassinations of American and NATO military personnel. Posted at the ATAA Web site in April 2001 and circulated via Turkish Forum in December 2001 and June 2003—my protests notwithstanding—“The Taner Akçam Story” ended up by March 2004 at Tall Armenian Tale next to a photo of a PKK member, which was captioned as “a younger Taner Akçam, from PKK.org.” Three years later, the photo has been updated, but Artun’s commentary remains, a frequently cited resource for copy-pasters.

As further evidence of my “terrorist” past, Tall Armenian Tale posted a detailed chronology related to incidents of arrest, on dates that even I can’t remember, for leafletting and postering in my student movement days. Whoever provided this information failed to note, however, that people were frequently arrested for such activities even after official permission had been obtained. An entire 9-page section of

Tall Armenian Tale is now dedicated to vilifying me and my work, and well over 200 pages of that site mention my name.

Next came 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 emails were sent anonymously to my employer, the University of Minnesota, and to me personally. A profile of the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies and its director, my colleague Stephen Feinstein, was added to Tall Armenian Tale.

With the publication of *A Shameful Act*, the circle began to close in.

On Nov. 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 (probably Muslims killed by revenge-seeking Armenians in 1919), 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 signed by Turkish Forum's Ibrahim Kurtulus "on behalf of Dr. Ata Erim the Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Federation of Turkish American Association, FTAA and Dr. Kaya Buyukataman the President of Turkish Forum" 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."

Two days later, on November 19, Turkish Forum published an 800-word letter to the dean from Turkish-American activist Ergun Kirlikovali, with the title, "Turkish Forum's Letter to the University". Kirlikovali characterized me in this official Turkish Forum's letter as "a convicted terrorist in Turkey... one of the leaders of an armed and clandestine group advocating a Marxist-Leninist takeover of Turkish Republic caught red-handed in a bombing plot in late 1970s... part of a group which bombed the limousine of the American ambassador Comer in Ankara in 1969... He is in America probably illegally."

Gusan Yedic of Turkish Forum posted further "terrorist" allegations about me on November 24, with this sarcastic admonition: "The friends who are going to attend the concert of Taner Akcam and his orchestra at Yeshiva University are earnestly requested to behave in a gentlemanly manner. Attendees are obliged to follow black-tie party rules." On November 30, Turkish Forum mobilized an email 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. I let them know that if they were going to allow intruders from Turkish Forum to leaflet my presentation and disrupt the symposium, I wasn't going to participate. Yeshiva was concerned. An organizer who had attended the CUNY gathering on Nov. 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