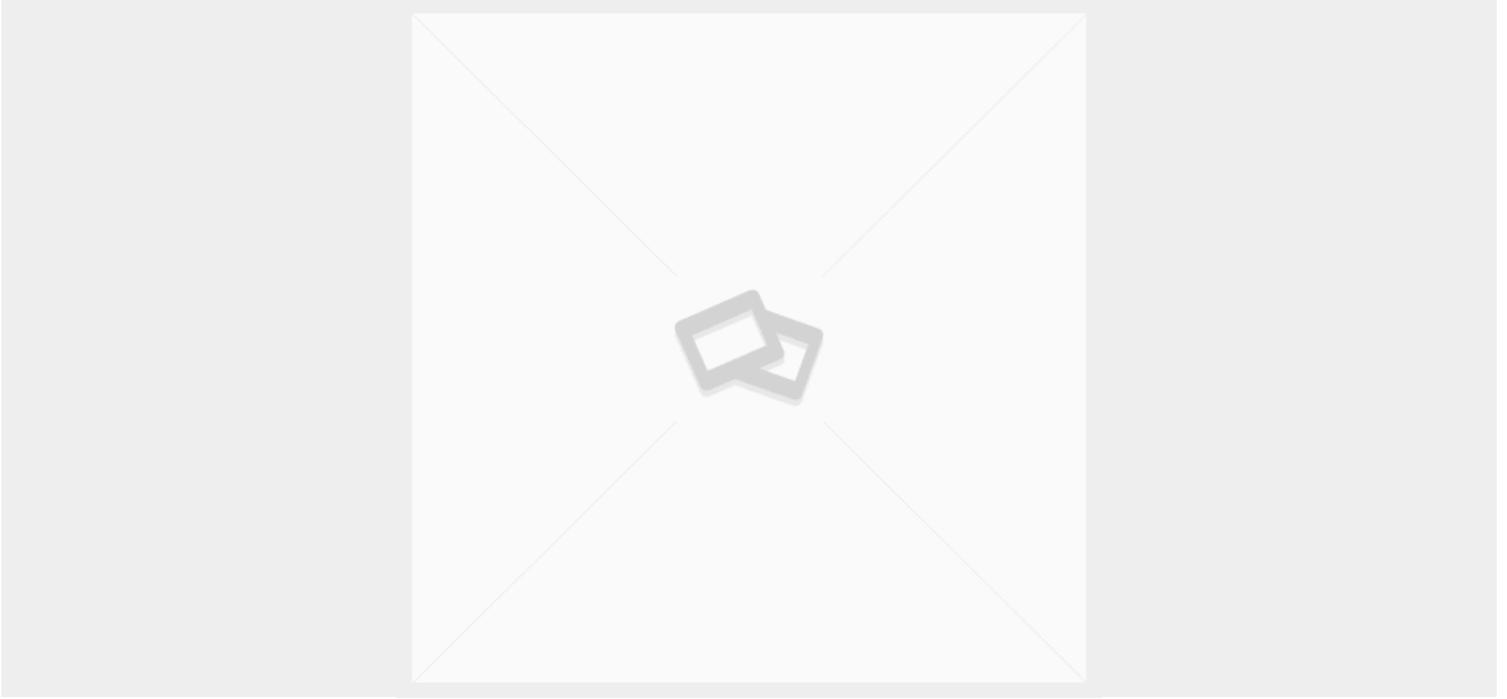


TANER AKÇAM PHD, UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA & PAYAM AKHAVAN PHD, MCGILL UNIVERSITY

Posted on December 11, 2008 by Keghart



Category: [Opinions](#)



Press Conference, Washington DC, 17 January 2008

During a press conference at the National Press Club Akçam, a leading scholar in the field of Holocaust and Genocide studies at the University of Minnesota said that dissent and free speech are restricted due to a dangerous mindset that exists within Turkey. He said the atmosphere of intolerance has worsened, rather than improved, in the year following Dink's murder.

Press Conference, Washington DC, 17 January 2008

During a press conference at the National Press Club Akçam, a leading scholar in the field of Holocaust and Genocide studies at the University of Minnesota said that dissent and free speech are restricted due to a dangerous mindset that exists within Turkey. He said the atmosphere of intolerance has worsened, rather than improved, in the year following Dink's murder.

"A climate has been created such that to attack and persecute intellectual is considered a patriotic act," Akçam explained. "The media targets and attacks intellectuals and turns them into prey, free for the hunting...the justice system punishes the intellectuals, and thugs are used as pawns by the law enforcement agencies to attack and kill the targeted intellectuals. The government conceals these crimes, blurs the evidence and backs the law enforcement officers who are involved in these crimes."

Akçam left his native Turkey and relocated to the US in 2001, after his writing on the Armenian Genocide began to appear in English. Following the 2006 publication of his book, "A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility," Akçam says the campaign against him intensified. He has received death threats, been physically attacked and has had his book tours violently disrupted. He has been labeled a "traitor" to his country, and was recently detained for hours at a Montreal airport due to a vandalized Wikipedia entry in his online biography.

In addition to denying the historical truth, the Turkish government maintains that the events of 1915 are a matter for historians. Ironically, scholars and writers like Akçam and Dink are routinely prosecuted under Turkey's infamous Article 301 of the penal code for acknowledging the genocide. According to Akçam, Dink was targeted because he was a direct threat to what Turks call the "deep state," the unelected body of government known for targeting reformists and other perceived enemies in the name of nationalism. As a Turkish citizen of Armenian descent, the newspaper editor was a fierce defender of freedom of the press and was determined to speak the truth, even as ultra-nationalist forces were determined to silence his voice.

"What we want is very simple," Akçam explained. "We want freedom of speech and we want justice."

Dr. Payam Akhavan, a renowned scholar of International Law at McGill University, is representing Akçam in a case before the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) against the Republic of Turkey and also took part in the press conference.

A former UN war crimes prosecutor, Akhavan provided an overview of the criminal charges brought against Akçam in Turkey. He said the case pending before the ECHR challenges the validity of Article 301 as a violation of freedom of speech. He argued that scholars like Professor Akçam be allowed to engage in research and publication without fear of prosecution or vigilante justice.

Akhavan said that Article 301 continues to be used to silence free speech and debate on the Armenian Genocide, which only serves to keep modern Turkey hostage to its past rather than reckoning with historical injustices and encouraging a democratic culture in which reconciliation with Armenians may be possible.

"The use of Article 301 is a flagrant violation of freedom of speech under Article 10 of the European Convention," Akhavan said. "What the Turkish government is doing through its failure to repeal Article 301 is that, instead of criminalizing hate speech, Article 301 is actually legitimizing hate speech by denying or minimizing the destruction of Armenians in 1915."

"If the position of the government is that the issue of the Armenian Genocide should not be politicized, should not be debated before the U.S. Congress, then that position has no credibility whatsoever so long as free speech on this issue is criminalized in Turkey," he added.

Assembly Executive Director Bryan Adrouny said, "One year after Dink's murder, Ankara has done precious little to overturn the climate of prejudice and repression that led to this unspeakable crime. Instead, Armenians and other minorities are still at risk. All people of goodwill should unite in calling for a repeal of Article 301."

One year after Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink was assassinated on an Istanbul street, Taner Akçam, a Turkish historian and university professor, says the Turkish government, media and law enforcement bodies are working in tandem to harass, intimidate and persecute intellectuals who challenge the government's version of the events of 1915, the Armenian Assembly of America reports.

