TANER AKÇAM: TURKISH POLICY OF DENIAL IS A STRATEGY OF BUYING TIME

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"The decision will be made by politicians, not historians"
By Taner Akcam, **The Armenian Reporter**, 15 September 2009

The daily Taraf, dubbed by Spiegel as "Turkey's most courageous newspaper," on September 4 published an interview with Taner Akçam, who holds the chair in Armenian Genocide Studies at Clark University. Professor Akçam, author of A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility,"" spoke to Yildiray Ogur about the protocols on the establishment of relations between Armenia and Turkey, which were unveiled on August 31. The following translation, by Fatima Sakarya, is published by the Armenian Reporter with Professor Akçam's permission.

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Normalization vs. reconciliation

Taraf: How do you define the issue between Turkey and Armenia?

Taner Akçam: There are two separate problems between Turkey and Armenia. You could define the first as the normalization of relations and the second as the problem of reconciliation as a result of what occurred in history. These two problems should be dealt with entirely separately, and normalization of relations should be achieved immediately, without any precondition. There are some steps being taken right now in this direction, and this should be strongly encouraged.

The establishment of diplomatic relations should follow the opening of the borders. Azerbaijan should be made to understand that its objections are unjustified and that the normalization of relations between Turkey and Armenia is in its own interest also.

Whenever the discussion turned to the problems related to history, the late Hrant Dink would say, "The real problem is the normalization of relations and the opening of borders. Without that, you can't solve any problem."

The steps taken toward the normalization of relations won't solve the problems associated with history, but they prepare the groundwork for doing so. The establishment of peace is another issue altogether and should be taken up on its own.

An absurd question

Taraf: The establishment of a joint commission on research of the genocide claims is on the agenda. Through the efforts of certain civic organizations on this subject, some conferences were organized in Switzerland. What are your thoughts and recommendations regarding this commission and what it can achieve?

Taner Akçam: If there is a problem between the two sides, and they want to find a resolution, of course the formation of a commission is appropriate. What is important is that they understand why the commission is being formed and for what purpose.

I don't believe that either Armenia or international circles will accept the formation of a commission based upon the recommendation of the Turkish government to "research the claims of genocide." It will be impossible to establish a commission for the purpose of coming to a conclusion on the question of, "Were the events of 1915 a genocide?" I think we need to put that idea completely out of our heads.

This idea is based on some false presumptions. First of all is a presumption that operates from an idea that there is an unknown out there, and that if historians were to get together and publish what they knew, this unknown would disappear. In fact, this is not the case, either for the Armenians or for the international academic world.

What we have before us is Turkey's policy of denial.

The subject bears a close resemblance to the Kurdish issue. For 90 years, Turkey claimed that there were no Kurds, and that these people were really Turks who happened to live in the mountains. Telling Kurds today, "Let's form a commission and study the problem scientifically, and if the commission determines that Kurds do exist, we'll move forward from there," makes about as much sense as saying, "We will accept the decision of a commission formed for the purpose of making a decision on the events of 1915."

Any commission would lack authority

Secondly, this belief rests on a false presumption that if the commission were formed and a conclusion were reached, everyone would agree and accept that conclusion. Neither Armenians nor the interested academic world expects or needs this.

Also, if a commission were formed with "the authority to make a decision regarding what happened in 1915," it would be disbanded the moment it was formed. Historians do not possess final authority to make definitive pronouncements on history.

One could claim that what we have is more of a legal issue than a historical one. Here's the question: Legally, can a definition that was created in 1948 be used to define an event from 1915? The separate sides could approach an judicial institution and request a legal conclusion. An action like this has absolutely nothing to do with the idea of a historians' commission.

If the judicial institution were approached and it did not immediately dismiss the application for lack of jurisdiction, it is obvious what its conclusion would be. In accordance with accepted legal principle that a law cannot be retroactively applied, even if the events of 1915 were determined to fit the definition of genocide in the 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, it could not be applied retroactively.