

Article by Robert Fisk regarding Taner Akcam

Any political filth or personal libel can be hurled at the innocent

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Could it possibly be that the security men who guard the frontiers of North America are supporting Holocaust denial? Alas, it's true. Here's the story.

Taner Akcam is the distinguished Turkish scholar at the University of Minnesota who, with immense courage, proved the facts of the Armenian genocide - the deliberate mass murder of up to a million and a half Armenians by the Ottoman Turkish authorities in 1915 - from Turkish documents and archives. His book *A Shameful Act* was published to great critical acclaim in Britain and the United States.

He is now, needless to say, being threatened with legal action in Turkey under the infamous Law 301 - which makes a crime of insulting "Turkishness" - but it's probably par for the course for a man who was granted political asylum in Germany after receiving an eight-year prison sentence in his own country for articles he had written in a student journal; Amnesty International had already named him a prisoner of conscience.

But Mr Akcam has now become a different kind of prisoner: an inmate of the internet hate machine, the circle of hell in which any political filth or personal libel can be hurled at the innocent without any recourse to the law, to libel lawyers or to common decency.

The Armenian-Turkish journalist Hrant Dink was misquoted on the internet for allegedly claiming that Turkish blood was "poisonous"; this total lie - Dink never said such a thing - prompted a young man to murder him in an Istanbul street.

But Taner Akcam's experience is potentially far more serious for all of us. As he wrote in a letter to me this month, "Additional to the criminal investigation (law 301) in Turkey, there is a hate campaign going on here in the USA, as a result of which I cannot travel internationally any more... 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."

Akcam was travelling to lecture in Montreal and took the Northwest Airlines flight from Minneapolis on 16 February this year. The Canadian immigration officer, Akcam says, was "courteous" - but promptly detained him at Montreal's Trudeau airport. Even odder, the Canadian immigration officer

asked him why he needed to be detained. Akcam tells me he gave the man a brief history of the genocide and of the campaign of hatred against him in the US by Turkish groups "controlled by ... Turkish diplomats" who "spread propaganda stating that I am a member of a terrorist organisation".

All this went on for four hours while the immigration officer took notes and made phone calls to his bosses. Akcam was given a one-week visa and the Canadian officer showed him - at Akcam's insistence - a piece of paper which was the obvious reason for his temporary detention.

"I recognised the page at once," Akcam says. "The photo was a still from a 2005 documentary on the Armenian genocide... 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 ... my Wikipedia biography has been persistently vandalised by anonymous 'contributors' intent on labelling me as a terrorist. The same allegations has been repeatedly scrawled, like gangland graffiti, as 'customer reviews' of my books at Amazon."

Akcam was released, but his reflections on this very disturbing incident are worth recording. "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 version of my Wikipedia biography, printed it out on 16 February, and showed it to me - voil?! - as a result."

But this was not the end. Prior to his Canadian visit, two Turkish-American websites had been hinting that Akcam's "terrorist activities" should be of interest to American immigration authorities. And sure enough, Akcam was detained yet again - for another hour - by US Homeland Security officers at Montreal airport before boarding his flight at Montreal for Minnesota two days later. On this occasion, he says that the American officer - US Homeland Security operates at the Canadian airport - gave him a warning: "Mr Akcam, 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."

So let's get this clear. US and Canadian officials now appear to be detaining the innocent on the grounds of hate postings on the internet. And it is the innocent - guilty until proved otherwise, I suppose - who must now pay lawyers to protect them from Homeland Security and the internet. But as Akcam says, there is nothing he can do.

"Allegations against me, posted by the Assembly of Turkish American Associations, Turkish Forum and 'Tall Armenian Tale' (a Holocaust denial

website) have been copy-pasted and recycled through innumerable websites and e-groups ever since I arrived in America. By now, my name in close proximity to the English word 'terrorist' turns up in well over 10,000 web pages."

I'm not surprised. There is no end to the internet's circle of hate. What does shock me, however, is that the men and women chosen to guard their nations against Osama bin Laden and al-Qa'ida are reading this dirt and are prepared to detain an honourable scholar such as Taner Akcam on the basis of it.

I don't think the immigration lads are to blame. I once remember listening to a Canadian official at Toronto airport carefully explaining to a Palestinian visitor that he was not required to tell any police officer about his religion or personal beliefs, that he should feel safe in Canada.

No, it's their bosses in Ottawa and Washington I wonder about. Put very simply, how much smut are the US and Canadian immigration authorities taking off the internet? And how much of it is now going to be flung at us when we queue at airports to go about our lawful business?