

**The Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission:
A Commentary from the Perspective of Turkish Civil Society
by Taner Akçam**

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The Zoryan Institute asked Dr. Taner Akçam, author of the recently published book, *Dialogue Across an International Divide: Essays Towards a Turkish-Armenian Dialogue*, to write a commentary on the Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission from the perspective of Turkish civil society. Dr. Akçam submitted the following, with the note that most of these ideas have already appeared in Turkish, in such newspapers as *Agos*.

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At first glance, the announcement of the creation of a Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission in Geneva on July 10 is a positive step that everyone must applaud. It can be regarded as a victory for the circles that have been striving for a Turkish-Armenian dialogue for a long time, despite the difficulties they had to face. For those unfamiliar with this background, let me simply state that the past year especially has been marked by initiatives by a number of individuals and organizations to promote Turkish-Armenian dialogue, which have encountered a harsh reaction from the Turkish State. Since the announcement in Geneva was made with the tacit support of the Turkish State, as will explained below, this indicates a fundamental change in Turkey's policy regarding the Armenian problem. That policy can be summarized simply as, "there is no 'Armenian problem' today," and if there is, it is the fault of the Armenians, themselves. Up to now, the State's policy has manifested itself in the persistent refusal of any discussion with the Armenians and the denial of any such problem, since the foundation of Republic. It seems now that the Turkish State is tacitly conceding its policy has failed. In this sense, the Commission marks a turning point in the history of the Turkish-Armenian conflict. This is especially true regarding developments now going on in Turkey — the

attempts to deal openly with history, and the advancing of the democratization process versus the attacks on its proponents — where the side effect of this initiative is more important than the initiative itself. Why Turkey has abandoned its old policy is an important subject, but must be left for a separate discussion.

There are three different groups that could take credit for this breakthrough. The first is the USA, which, for its geo-political, economic and military considerations, wants to help Turkey. The second is the Armenian Diaspora, which doggedly struggled for acknowledgement of the Armenian genocide by the world and especially by the Turkish State. The sudden recognition by several European states recently encouraged the Diaspora, who has struggled to keep the issue alive during the past decades, and propelled the lobbying efforts to convince governments to adopt the recognition of the Armenian genocide. This could be a conspicuous reason for Turkey's move to the reconciliation table. The third group, although perhaps politically powerless at the moment, but which, in the long term, is the most powerful factor for change in the Turkish State, because they are the force for democratization in Turkey, consists of the civil political groups inside and outside Turkey, who have been struggling for years for a dialogue between Armenians and Turks, for the benefit of both the Turkish and Armenian states.

Before I touch on some points regarding this Commission, which seem to me causes for serious concern, I wish to stress that, regardless of the character of the initiative, there will be two important and positive side effects in Turkey. First, the frozen and harsh atmosphere regarding the "Armenian issue" will melt, and the possibility of talking openly about Turkish-Armenian problems will increase. Second, as a result of the first point, the position of moderate circles will be strengthened. In this sense, this Commission is a very positive attempt and a good step forward in breaking out of the vicious circle of Turkish-Armenian relations.

There are, however, some very obvious flaws in this Commission: a) the secrecy in which it was formed; b) the nature of the Turkish participants; c) the deliberate ignoring by the Turkish participants of the importance of Turkey's history relative to its present, seeing them even as contradictory.

First of all, why was it necessary for the Turkish State to meet with Armenians in secret? After all, those who would oppose such a meeting are

part of the very same circle that participated in the Geneva meeting. The people who participated in Geneva are part of the same circle that has led the witch-hunt in the Turkish press against certain academics who have called for dialogue and an open debate about history. It is the Turkish State, itself, which has oppressed the civil groups in Turkey that have been struggling for a dialogue with Armenians for years. If the participants in this Commission are from the same circle, then why are they meeting in secret? Who are they afraid of? There is no one, other than themselves, who would oppose such a meeting. After all, all the Turkish participants are well connected to the very inner circle of the ruling elite, which itself has become a state within a state (*derin devlet*). Furthermore, they have declared that their participation in this Commission is with the awareness of the Turkish State. The idea of hiding oneself from oneself is incomprehensible. This secrecy is not only suspicious; it produces a negative result, as it diminishes support from society. It could indicate that the aim of the Turkish State may be something other than seeking a dialogue with Armenians.

The second flaw is that the individuals who are participating in this Commission are also of concern. Some of them are known for their negative attitude towards Turkish-Armenian dialogue. For example, Gündüz Aktan is notorious for his role during the debates regarding an Armenian genocide resolution in the American Congress last fall. He was the leader of the propagandists who fought vehemently against “the Armenian lie” and defined the Armenian-Turkish Conflict, especially the genocide issue, as “war.” He openly declared that the “war” against the Armenian Thesis (the claim of genocide) should be an important task of the Turkish Government and wrote many articles about how this war should be conducted. There is no one among these Turkish participants who has actively been involved in Turkish-Armenian dialogue, and would therefore have some credibility with Turkish society on this issue. It further indicates that the aim of the Turkish State might be something other than seeking a dialogue with Armenians.

The third flaw, the downplaying of history, is a fundamental one. Although the Commission’s terms of reference state that it “will secure expertise based on project requirements, and may include specialists on historical, psychological and legal matters,” it seems that the Turkish participants interpret this in a peculiar way. For example, in a press conference held right after the announcement of the establishment of the Commission,

Ozdem Sanberk, former Turkish ambassador to Britain, said, "The intent is not to find what the truth is, but it is to open new horizons for the future and enhance mutual understanding." Turkish Foreign Minister Ilter Türkmen said, "The commission's task is not to come to a historical judgement. As the dialogue proceeds, we hope to be able to overcome problems, but that does not mean we will come to an exact historical photo of what happened 85 years ago." They see a big distinction between the past and the present. Thinking that past and present can not be handled together, the participants have decided to deal basically with the present. This is the old way of thinking, and represents a serious flaw in logic. In the process of dialogue, one should address and overcome this problem. The dialogue process must include speaking openly and normally about history, as an important part of the reconciliation process. History and the present can never be completely separated, and you can not ignore one in favor of the other. It is impossible to salvage the present by consigning history to oblivion.

It seems that different concepts of dialogue are emerging. The term "dialogue," up to now, was used only by civil society. The Turkish State will now adopt this term and make it part of the foundation of Turkish-Armenian relations. This is not necessarily bad. We can surmise, however, that the dialogue process approved by the Turkish State will be more or less a bargaining process. First, it will try to avoid any discussion of history; but if the topic can not be avoided, it will try to control the discussion. In this process it will follow a double-edged policy. While holding out the carrot of "Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation" to the international community, in order to mitigate the pressure on itself, it will wield the stick of political pressure against the internal groups of Turkey that have been calling for genuine dialogue. The Turkish State really has tried everything to stigmatize, terrorize and criminalize these groups. Now the State wants to take this process under its control. It is obvious what it is trying to accomplish. It will try to ensure that the dialogue process does not take the form of a debate on history, and especially a debate on genocide. It will try to cut any connection with history and will argue that, in order to achieve reconciliation, we should not put history in the spotlight.

No one should ignore the reality that the most important part of dialogue is readiness to speak about history openly. I do not want to get stuck on the term "genocide," but by the minimum ethical standard, it is an essential requirement to condemn that mass killing in history. We know that Turkish

society has been blinded by an 85-year long policy of denial. We are aware of this fact and for that very reason we initiated the idea of dialogue. After 85 years of silence, Armenians and Turks should talk with each other, with only one precondition: the readiness to listen. Everything else (friendly relations, to connect with each other on various levels, such as business or social interaction, etc.) must be combined with talking about history. I have written at length about this in my book, *Insan Haklari ve Ermeni Sorunu: Ittihat ve Terakki'den Kurtulus Savasina*, published in Turkey, and in *Dialogue Across an International Divide: Essays Towards a Turkish-Armenian Dialogue*, translated and published by the Zoryan Institute.

Whatever the intentions, it seems that civil society in Turkey has achieved a big success, because it is the moral victor in this process. There may be only a handful of those active in this struggle, but together with the international pressure on Turkey, their argument is finally becoming effective. It is a good feeling for a proponent of reconciliation that the Turkish Government now finally acknowledges the absolute necessity of dialogue.

Let me make some suggestions for what would be a genuine approach to Turkish-Armenian dialogue and reconciliation.

First, the Commission must extend its membership to include individuals who have been active in the Turkish-Armenian dialogue issue, and who have credibility.

Second, the seriousness of this Commission (and the Turkish State), and its ultimate success, will be measured by how it deals with the circles who have been striving for dialogue for so long. If the witch-hunts, the stigmatizing, the terrorizing, and the criminalizing of these circles continue, it means there is really no change in Turkey's long-standing policy. In that case, the Turkish side would not be fulfilling its promise, and the work of the Commission would be meaningless. If a desire for dialogue really exists, the easiest way to achieve it would be to no longer suppress the civil groups and to let the process flow naturally.

Third, there has to be an open discussion of Turkey's history. Open debate of the past in Turkish society must be treated as something normal. At the same time, history and the present must be treated as equally important in this process. If Turkey can begin to face the problems in its history, then it

can begin to also face the problems in its present. This is the real benefit of dialogue.

Finally, while it is understandable that trust of Turkey is not strong at this time, because of its long history of misdeeds and falsification, Turkey's readiness to come to the table and talk with Armenians must be appreciated by all concerned. No one should expect a total change overnight. We should follow the process critically and observe Turkey's behavior from this point forward, especially its treatment of its own internal dissenters. It is in the Turkish State's own hands to change others' perception of it.