



Taner Akçam as Scholar-Activist and Armenian-Turkish Relations

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An important debate in the field of comparative genocide studies emerged about 15 years ago. Should scholars of genocide disconnect themselves from the political and even ethical dimensions of engagement with past genocides and prevention of future genocides? In other words, does being a proper scholar require disinterest, or is it permissible—and even laudable—for a scholar of genocide to take ethical stands and to advocate for intervention against ongoing genocides, justice—however defined—for past cases, and prevention of genocide in the future?

The stakes were very high and, as in any academic context, there were numerous factors, possibly including personal ones. Nonetheless, the question of whether scholarship must be engaged or disinterested precipitated a rupture in the membership of the International Association of Genocide Scholars (IAGS) and led to the formation of the International Network of Genocide Scholars (INoGS) in the mid-2000s. The latter group espoused the view that activist scholarship favoring a particular ethical, policy, or related position, is necessarily tainted by the scholar's agenda

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and thus poor scholarship. Many in the former group maintained the position that *not* taking ethical and policy stands on issues of justice for past genocides, intervention against ongoing genocides or processes that are leading to genocide, and prevention of future genocides is in effect to act as bystanders. Their silence, moreover, enables ongoing and future genocides and perpetuates the suffering of victims of past genocides and the denials and lack of rectification efforts that is their typical affliction.

While both sides failed to develop their viewpoints conclusively, each side was based on a crucial foundation for good scholarship on genocide. History is rife with the cooptation of systems of knowledge, including academic systems in the modern era, for specific religious, political, economic, military, and other agendas. What is more, what might be termed “human rights-rationalized interventionism” emerged in the post-Cold War to replace (1) ideological defenses against all-consuming capitalism or communism (depending on one’s location in the world system) and (2) neo-imperialist post-World War II evolutions of “the White Man’s Burden” advanced through international development programs and related economic tools, such as conditional International Monetary Fund and World Bank loans and the World Trade Organization. For instance, the United States justified the Gulf War against Iraq and the subsequent sanctions regime as well as later invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan on humanitarian grounds, even though the clear goal was imposing a geopolitical order favorable to and dominated by the United States. Even women’s (and girl’s) liberation from oppression was invoked as a cover for US military action, despite the contradiction with the US military’s own rampant internally and externally directed sexualized violence and endemically sexist culture. Attacks on the field of genocide studies, such as Edward S. Herman and David Peterson’s sophisticated *The Politics of Genocide*, which employs denial of the Rwanda Genocide and the genocide in Darfur in order to make its faulty case,¹ have leveled false claims and far exceeded responsible criticisms based on reasonable analyses of available facts. Yet, the “critical genocide studies” movement has advanced an important intervention by challenging practitioners in the field to recognize problematic potentials and tendencies in approaches to genocide issues and cases. It highlights the readiness to condemn and to advocate for intervention against regimes in the Global South for actions consistent with past

¹Edward S. Herman and David Peterson, *The Politics of Genocide* (New York, NY, USA: Monthly Review Press, 2010), especially pp. 39–45 and 51–68.

and present standard operating of Global North states. Mass violence in these states, particularly great powers, is rarely fully recognized let alone made subject to international condemnation, and *never* seen as an appropriate justification for intervention.

Prior to the scholarly rift, the dominant focus was on genocide as a problem and the condemnation of any genocidal regime, which was an important phase in the development of the field and in the struggle against mass violence and oppression. This included such things as a challenge to the historically absolute principle of state sovereignty and its virtually total protection of genocidal activities of powerful states. Yet, as these responses became more established, their incompleteness or susceptibility to corruption and cooptation emerged. The next phase of genocide studies focused on critical appraisal of “engaged” scholarship, but ultimately the limitations of this approach also emerged. Thus, it became apparent that it was essential to balance the two opposing needs or tendencies, one toward critical appraisal of engaged scholarship and the other toward critical appraisal of *disengaged* scholarship.

I have recently developed a model of appropriately engaged genocide scholarship based on specific concepts of “objectivity” and “interest.”² The latter is not a taint that some scholars have and others do not—on the contrary, all scholars are interested, whether motivated by a particular political agenda, career advancement, compassion for victims, or something else. The former is not a delusional relic of modernism that can only be claimed with that dramatic irony of those who fail to recognize that we *all* operate with hidden assumptions and preconscious organizing frameworks as the very condition of human cognition. Objectivity is an epistemic limit condition that in practice becomes a goal to strive toward, even if it is impossible to achieve. On the other hand, interest properly developed is what motivates a scholar to produce the best—including most objective—research possible. I extend my previous theorization here to add that advocacy in itself is neither necessarily corrupting nor necessarily noble; what I term “reluctant advocacy” is advocacy imposed by the context in which research is done rather than being the standard against which the content of that research is evaluated. Reluctant advocacy might characterize the production of objective scholarship, or it might be

² Henry C. Theriault, “The Ethics of Genocide Scholarship and New Trends in Rhetorical Manipulation in Genocide Studies,” *Genocide Studies International*, 16, 1 (2022): 65–90.

imposed on scholarly work the production of which is driven by another motive or other motives.

A context of genocide denial makes it both easier and more difficult to produce appropriately engaged scholarship. It is easier, because denialism forces a coincidence between advocacy and objectivity. All scholarship that attempts to be objective works in opposition to denial, regardless of whether any particular scholar intends this or not. At the same time, the force of denial itself can become the organizing principle of scholarship on a denied genocide. Scholarship on a denied case tends to be constructed in a manner that addresses existing and anticipates potential denial arguments and falsifications. While this does not determine what is presented as the facts of a case, it does impact which specific facts are chosen for presentation and how they are presented. In cases where denial is not a privileged position, such as Rwanda or the Holocaust, scholars can devote relatively little attention to proving the centralization of the intent to commit genocide, and they can focus instead on how rank-and-file perpetrators behaved in different contexts. In a denied case, such as the Armenian Genocide, much more attention might be on the issue of major perpetrators' planning, decision-making, and related issues. The hyper-cruelty of perpetrator methods might be taken as a basic point in treatments of genocides in which denial is not given significant credence, such that it is treated as a datum providing insight into the mentality of perpetrators. At the same time, in cases of effectively denied genocides, cruelty may require explanation because it can be presented as belying genocidal intent, as excessive cruelty actually interferes with advancement toward the goal of elimination of a target population understood simply as their physical destruction.³

³For two examples of scholarship attempting to explain *why* hyper-cruelty is essential to the goal of destroying a target group, see Elisa von Joeden-Forgey, "The Devil in the Details: 'Life Force Atrocities' and the Assault on the Family in Times of Conflict," *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 5, 1 (2010): 1–19, and Henry C. Theriault, "Rethinking Dehumanization in Genocide," in *The Armenian Genocide: Cultural and Ethical Legacies*, edited by Richard Hovannissian (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2007), pp. 27–40. The former might be seen as responding to the tendency to exclude sexualized violence in favor of focus on direct killing simpliciter in genocide, while the latter to the mischaracterizing of the preservation of women and children for "deportations" instead of direct killing as evidence against the intent to destroy of the perpetrators. This second point was made by Marc Mamigonian in comments on my paper, "From Dehumanization to Imperial Dominance: Rethinking Genocidal Violence" at the National Association for Armenian Studies and Research, Belmont, Massachusetts, February 23, 2006.

The bulk of Taner Akçam's important scholarly output on the Armenian Genocide can be considered reluctant advocacy. In some cases, a particular topic is clearly intended to address denialist claims. For instance, *Killing Orders: Talat Pasha's Telegrams and the Armenian Genocide*⁴ not only responds to but definitively refutes long-standing efforts to dispute the authenticity of the telegraphs from Talat Pasha ordering aspects of the Armenian Genocide. Akçam also devotes attention to the memoirs of Naim Efendi, which originally collected these telegrams and serve as a key to authenticating them. *From Empire to Republic: Turkish Nationalism and the Armenian Genocide*⁵ takes a somewhat different approach. While it was clearly conceived in response to denialism and the pressure of denial was a force in shaping the work, Akçam's sophisticated method is not to respond directly to denial. Rather, he situates an important comprehensive account of how and why the Armenian Genocide occurred as a means of providing an understanding of Turkish denial rather than engaging in a debate with it. *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility*⁶ similarly approaches denial obliquely. The book complements *From Empire to Republic's* focus on the mechanics of the genocide with a definitive treatment of the decision-making history that generated and transformed motive into intention and then action.

Both books are first and foremost works of objective scholarship, which provide accounts of aspects of the Armenian case that stand alone as exceptional research. Their orientation toward denial is the function of a secondary contextualizing apparatus that puts this first-rate scholarship into a relationship to denial. This is crucial: the scholarship cannot be dismissed as reactive and thus suspect. On the contrary, it stands on its own as important work with a supplementary *contingent* though important relationship to denial that is created by the context but controlled by the secondary apparatus Akçam has employed to orient his scholarship toward denial. We see this method given its most developed form in *The Young Turks' Crime Against Humanity: The Armenian Genocide and Ethnic*

⁴Taner Akçam, *Killing Orders: Talat Pasha's Telegrams and the Armenian Genocide* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

⁵Taner Akçam, *From Empire to Republic: Turkish Nationalism and the Armenian Genocide* (London: Zed Books, 2004).

⁶Taner Akçam, *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility*, translated by Paul Bessemer (New York: Henry Holt/Metropolitan Books, 2006).

Cleansing in the Ottoman Empire.⁷ It is not merely that Akçam separates his treatment of denial into a specific chapter, but that he constructs an account of the relevant history of the Ottoman Empire generally that shows the destruction of the Armenians (and other Christians) to be inseparable from any credible understanding of that general history and its unfolding. The refutation of denial is thus implicit in the work. If the struggle for historical truth and against denial motivated the research behind the book, that research is the preexisting core around which the refutation of denial is built.

A perhaps lesser-known work, co-written with Vahakn Dadrian, *Judgment at Istanbul*,⁸ provides a perfect example of Akçam's ability to maintain objectivity *and* political force in his writings. In this work, the authors present an account of the trials of Armenian Genocide perpetrators held by the Ottoman government in the immediate aftermath of World War I. Through their account of the trials and the evidence they fixed in the historical record, as well as the shifting attitudes of those in power in Turkey in this period toward accountability for the genocide, Akçam and Dadrian allow the historical record to make the case that justice for the Armenian Genocide is still outstanding. At the same time, they provide one of the strongest sets of evidence for the veracity of the Genocide and the culpability of the Turkish state. They do so without polemic or even more than a cursory explanation of the denialist context in which the book is situated. In this way, political utility arises organically out of strong, unbiased scholarship, rather than scholarship imbued with a political message that would inevitably warp it.

In this sense, Akçam is an important figure in genocide studies, in addition to producing innovative research on the Armenian case. He represents the synthesis of the two opposing moments in the genocide scholarship, engagement and objectivity. A sign is his evolution regarding the issue of reparations. Early in his career, Akçam's remedy for addressing the legacy of the Armenian Genocide was promotion of Armenian-Turkish dialogue understood as joint projects of exchange meant to improve each group's understanding of the other.⁹ I will discuss the issue of dialogue

⁷Taner Akçam, *The Young Turks' Crime Against Humanity: The Armenian Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

⁸Vahakn N. Dadrian and Taner Akçam, *Judgment at Istanbul: The Armenian Genocide Trials* (New York: Berghahn 2011).

⁹Taner Akçam, *Dialogue Across an International Divide: Essays Toward a Turkish-Armenian Dialogue* (Cambridge, MA: Zoryan Institute, 2001).

below, but the point here is that, in this work and others of the period, Taner did not discuss reparations, suggesting that he did not see them as important to the process of establishing justice for the Armenian Genocide. This changed significantly and he eventually co-authored a work focused on the expropriation of individual and institutional property of Armenians.¹⁰ Though the book does not offer a model for a reparative process nor a case for reparations, it does provide an analysis and history of the legal mechanisms legitimizing the expropriation and subsequent failure to repair that can serve as the basis for individual and institutional reparations claims. This evolution suggests that the motivation behind his work has been an evolving ethical engagement with the Armenian Genocide. That his views have changed over time shows the genuineness of this effort. Indeed, his work on dialogue and reparations reveal a continuing commitment to engagement of the implications of his historical research, and not just the research itself. Equally relevant has been his insistence on the importance for Turkey of meaningful acknowledgement of the Armenian Genocide as an essential part of Turkish history and key force in the development of the Turkish Republic and its political, military, and social culture. It is not just truth that Akçam pursues, but ethical action based on the truth.

Through nearly half of this chapter what has not been mentioned is for most readers and students of Akçam the most salient fact about him as researcher and teacher: he is a *Turkish* scholar of the Armenian Genocide. This is a very challenging position to be in, and most who could put themselves in this position do not in order to avoid its ethical complexity and risk. This risk is not just external condemnation by Turkish deniers, ultra-nationalists, and others, which can escalate to death threats and threats of governmental detention, de facto expulsion from one's home country, and more, all of which Akçam has experienced, but that of potentially profound internal psychological tension caused by commitment to pursuit of a morally correct course at the same time as one tries to maintain a personal psychological identity that depends on ultra-nationalist belonging that cannot tolerate the truth about the genocidal sins of one's "nation."¹¹ Unlike many progressive Turkish scholars who recognize that something

¹⁰Taner Akçam and Umit Kurt, *The Spirit of the Laws: The Plunder of Wealth in the Armenian Genocide* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015).

¹¹This kind of molding of individuals such that personal identity is built around and depends for its foundation on national identity is characteristic of the United States and many other states in addition to Turkey.

occurred in 1915 but fall short of labelling it genocide, Akçam has never avoided or qualified his use of the term “genocide” and never tried to contextualize the Armenian case as a mere historical moment for Turkey; he has remained steadfast regarding the importance of facing the Armenian Genocide for Turkey *today*. The takeaway here is not that Akçam is exceptional among Turks (only), but that he is exceptional among *human beings*, for denial of Native American genocide(s) pervades North and South American societies and cultures, denial of the genocide of Bosnians pervades Serbian society, denial of the mass atrocity of the Vietnam War (which I consider genocidal) pervades US society, denial of the genocide of “communists” pervades Indonesia, and on and on. Akçam is among those rare people in any society who is willing to stand up for truth and to insist on its political relevance, even at great risk to himself.

To be fair, it is not difficult to distinguish oneself in this way relative to Turkish society. Denial is so rampant and Armenians so disheartened by it and so accustomed to aggressive, threatening ill-treatment by Turkish people in positions of power and authority that mere use of the term genocide in reference to 1915 causes exuberant celebration and praise of the user. Indeed, those who hesitate at “genocide” but who nevertheless recognize the targeting and suffering of Armenians are often given a pass and lauded nonetheless. What is worse, even those who are outright hostile toward “uppity” Armenians who challenge them as equals¹² continue to receive praise from Armenians, perhaps because Armenians are so used to a secondary status relative to Turks that disrespect is misperceived as equal treatment.

A test of the morality of Akçam’s approach, however, reveals something very important: he has gone far beyond what would have been necessary to secure his place as one of the most important and respected Turkish voices on the Armenian Genocide, far beyond what he would have needed to do if earning praise from Armenians were his goal. If it seems inappropriate to put myself in the position of making claims about Akçam’s morality in relation to the Armenian Genocide, I should stress that there is nothing in his work, public statements, relations with Armenians, Turks,

¹²For a particularly appropriate example, see Halil Berktaş, “A Genocide, Three Constituencies, Thoughts for the Future (Part I),” in *Controversy and Debate: Special Armenian Genocide Issue of the Armenian Weekly*, April 24, 2007: 4–5, 26. For an analysis of this instance, see Henry C. Theriault, “Post-Genocide Imperial Domination,” in *Controversy and Debate: Special Armenian Genocide Issue of the Armenian Weekly*, April 24, 2007: 6–8, 26.

or others, or anything else that makes such an evaluation pertinent. It is not his conduct, but the context of overarching Armenian-Turkish history and dynamics that makes this issue relevant. As in any case of interaction between members of a victim and perpetrator group, especially based on engagement of the perpetration and victimization itself, the nature of that relationship is not just legitimately considered but must be considered, at both the personal and political levels.

For progressive Turks and Armenians, the relationship between these groups, states, and individuals has received significant attention for more than two decades. Akçam's career has spanned roughly the same period as explicit consideration of this relationship has been the focus of popular, political, and academic study and debate, and he himself has played an important and complex role in the evolution of thinking about those relationships and how they should be constructed. A number of initiatives have been tried during this time. Starting in 1998, the University of Michigan promoted the Workshop for Armenian/Turkish Scholarship (WATS), which over the next decade-plus organized a number of meetings of Turkish and Armenian scholars for interchange on the history of the 1915 period¹³ and was an attempt at building academic relations among Turks and Armenians. The year 2001 saw the formation of the Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission (TARC), which was primarily comprised of political figures in both communities, including former high-ranking government officials, most notably Gunduz Aktan, a former Turkish ambassador.¹⁴ This was a "track-two" effort at unofficial diplomatic relationship-building with implications for official relations. On 10 October 2009, an initiative aimed at formal normalization of relations between the Turkish and Armenian Republic governments, driven by the US Department of State, culminated in the signing of two agreements, the "Protocol on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations

¹³ On the WATS initiative, see Gerard Libaridian, "A Report on the Workshop for Armenian/Turkish Scholarship," October 31, 2006, at https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwjT9efAs-n2AhUMj4kEHT_4CS4QFnoECAIQAQ&url=http%3A%2F%2Flibaridian.com%2Fwp-content%2Fuploads%2F2018%2F09%2FA-Report-On-The-Workshop-For-ArmenianTurkish-Scholarship.doc&usg=AOvVaw14QzovBhSqtjpyqADueD (accessed March 28, 2022), and "Workshop for Armenian/Turkish Scholarship Records: 1998–2011," n.d., at <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/b/bhlead/umich-bhl-2012175?view=text#c01-3> (accessed March 28, 2022).

¹⁴ On TARC, see David L. Phillips, *Unsilencing the Past: Track Two Diplomacy and Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005).

Between Republic of Armenia and Republic of Turkey” and the “Protocol on Development of Relations Between the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Turkey.”¹⁵

In addition to these academic, civil society, and political processes, various individual-to-individual, small-group-to-small-group, and related initiatives developed during these years. These tended to provide the space for personal relationship building among self-selected participants. While in some cases organizers from inside and outside the Turkish and Armenian communities have had significant goals for these projects, including that they would serve as the basis for fundamental changes in relations between the Turkish and Armenian peoples as a whole or their two states, more realistically these projects offer benefits to participants themselves to the extent that they seek opportunities for intergroup connections. An important intervention came in 2008 from Bilgin Ayata, who proposed that the dialogue between Armenians and Turks should be expanded to include Kurds. Kurds have a complex role as not only perpetrators in the Armenian Genocide but also victims of Turkish governmental mass violence and oppression since that period and especially in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.¹⁶

It should be noted that conditions in Turkey itself have prevented any substantive attempts at transformation of the relationship between Turkey’s state and society and its small Armenian minority. The lack of progress on this front was punctuated and perhaps stopped for decades by the assassination of Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink in 2007 in the name of Turkish ultra-nationalism. This violent response to the then growing trend toward greater Armenian voice and agency in discussions about the legacy of the 1915 genocide exposed the limit of the Turkish state and society’s tolerance for truth about the past. Akçam’s characterization of denial in Turkey as reflective of a psychological and political “taboo” on confronting the truth of the Armenian Genocide drew attention to a limit that he hoped to weaken and did help weaken, but the taboo was replaced with a more sophisticated active, even aggressive, control of discourse on 1915 that has since given way to physical aggression

¹⁵Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, “Turkey, Armenia Sign Landmark Agreement to Normalize Ties,” October 11, 2009, at https://www.rferl.org/a/Turkey_Armenia_To_Sign_Landmark_Agreement_To_Normalize_Ties/1848293.html (accessed March 28, 2022).

¹⁶Bilgin Ayata, remarks, “Subject and Citizens: (Un)even Relations Among Turks, Kurds, and Armenians” panel, Bentley University, April 20, 2009.

in the form of Turkey's extensive participation in the attack on Armenians in Artsakh. In this way, the taboo on the 1915 genocide is no longer necessary, as domination of Armenians has gone from a source of embarrassment to one of pride. Armenian fears that advocacy for territorial reparations and global criticism of Turkey for its denial have confronted a burst of ultra-nationalist genocidal pride in the reassertion of unapologetic Turkish violence against Armenians. The impunity of Turkish military violence against Armenians has completed a profoundly therapeutic transformation of Turkish attitudes toward violence against Armenians.

Akçam's role in the evolution of concepts of Turkish-Armenian relations and of the actual relationship is two-fold. First is his overt contribution to this evolution, especially through the aforementioned *Dialogue Across and International Divide*. In this work, Akçam lays out principles for and an approach to future Armenian-Turkish relations based on dialogue. His approach reflects the dual commitment underlying his contributions to the struggle for Turkish recognition of the Armenian Genocide. The first is dedication to scholarly accuracy as the means to account for the harms done to Armenians. His later work on property expropriations confirms this concern.

The second is his dedication to the positive transformation of Turkey from an exclusive, homogenizing authoritarian entity to an inclusive, democratic, diverse state. This commitment predates his scholarship on the Armenian Genocide, as evidenced by his imprisonment in the 1970s for pro-democracy, pro-human rights political activism, and has driven it. The link between the Armenian Genocide and democratization of Turkey within Turkish progressive circles can be problematic. As I have pointed out previously,¹⁷ this is true regarding the view that democratization of Turkey will resolve the legacy of the Armenian Genocide by finally displacing the kind of ultra-nationalist and ethnocentrist features of Turkey today that were at the root of the 1915 genocide. Just as a democratic United States in 2022 is fully consistent with oppressive policies (including those that have the effect of disenfranchising the targeted group), systems, and

¹⁷ See, for instance, Henry C. Theriault, Alfred de Zayas, Jermaine O. McCalpin, and Ara Papian, *Resolution with Justice: Reparations for the Armenian Genocide* (Worcester, MA: Armenian Genocide Studies Reparations Study Group, 2015): 100–101, at www.armeniangenocidereparations.info (accessed March 28, 2022), and Henry C. Theriault, "Genocide, Denial, and Domination: Armenian-Turkish Relations from Conflict Resolution to Just Transformation," *Journal of African Conflicts and Peace Studies* 1, 2 (2009): 82–96 at 92–93.

attitudes as well as systemic violence against African Americans (and others), there is no reason that a democratic Turkey, even one that nominally recognizes Armenians in Turkey as full citizens, would not be characterized by pervasive attitudes of anti-Armenian-ism, denial of the Armenian Genocide, and systemic oppression of and violence against Armenians inside Turkey (and outside of it, as demonstrated by Turkey's participation in Azerbaijan's attack on Artsakh). While democratization would likely make the path to addressing the Armenian Genocide easier by opening up a space for free exchange of ideas as well as implicitly promoting a general ethic of pluralism, respect for difference, and wariness of governmental abuses and manipulations, democratization of Turkey and a proper accounting for the Armenian Genocide remain conceptually distinct goals that can be linked only through actual practice that connects them. No more than a socialist revolution ending capitalist exploitation would necessarily simultaneously end sexism, racism, heteronormativism and homophobia, xenophobia, and so on, would democratization of Turkey necessarily result in an adequate resolution of the Armenian Genocide legacy. Only by directly addressing the culturally embedded and institutionalized anti-Armenian attitudes, policies, and structures can a process leading to a democratic Turkey also include some kind of positive progress on the Armenian Genocide.

Although in the past I included Akçam among those I criticized for holding this view,¹⁸ the inclusion was based on a culpable reductive approach to his relevant statements in print and public on this issue: his position in fact has always been more complex. Specifically, a truly democratic Turkey for Akçam *must* include recognition of the Armenian Genocide and is inconceivable without that recognition. By requiring the Armenian Genocide to be part of the path through which the democratization of Turkey must be pursued, Akçam ensures that democratization must include at least recognition of the Armenian Genocide. What is more, for him, this recognition must be genuine and meaningful, with an understanding of all that was destroyed through it and, at the minimum, security for Armenians today.

At the same time, even this linkage carries the risk of instrumentalizing the Armenian Genocide. If properly addressing the legacy of the genocide

¹⁸Henry C. Theriault, "From Unfair to Shared Burden: The Armenian Genocide's Outstanding Damage and the Complexities of Repair," *Armenian Review* 53, 1–4 (2012): 121–166 at 131, 143–145.

is not a goal in its own right, such that the linkage with democratization of Turkey is between two equally necessary endpoints that independently deserve pursuit even if an appropriate outcome for Turkey requires that both be reached, not just one, then the Armenian Genocide is reduced to a tool for the advancement of specifically Turkish interests. Even if recognition and reparations are pursued, if they are pursued because of the benefits for Turks of democratization, then pursuit will represent a very subtle but powerful continuation of domination of Armenians as secondary subjects not worthy of being supported by Turks but always in the role of supporting them. This exploitative approach would render any recognition and even repair of the legacy of the genocide self-defeating, as the process itself would reinforce the oppressed status that recognition and repair are supposed to address.

Throughout his career as a scholar, on the contrary, Akçam's primary focus has been the Armenian Genocide. His concern for democratization of Turkey in relation to it itself might, at least partially, be seen as instrumental: by appealing to the growing progressive movement in Turkey to recognize the importance of resolving the Armenian Genocide legacy in a manner respectful of Armenians, Akçam has helped ensure that the pro-democracy movement in Turkey includes concern for the Armenian Genocide. The response to the assassination of Hrant Dink marked a key moment in this recognition of the importance of the Armenian Genocide. While I have every faith that Akçam is sincerely devoted to the democratization of Turkey, it is also a tool for promotion of Armenian Genocide recognition and repair. This use might even be seen to balance the above-discussed instrumentalization of the Armenian Genocide in the Turkish pro-democracy movement.

In this regard, it is telling that Akçam's focus even within the broader field of Genocide Studies has remained the Armenian case. While he has taken progressive stands on a range of human rights issues and supported the Clark University Strassler Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies' organization of programs and a curriculum covering a wide range of cases and issues, Akçam has never moved away from the Armenian case. This dedication to seeing this case through and not allowing it to slide out of focus through comparative studies confirms a refusal to provide any possible opening to denial, through a decentering of the Armenian Genocide.

The logic of privileging the Armenian Genocide rather than simply treating it as one case among many reflects an emphasis on equity rather than mere equality. This logic is crucial to a productive and respectful

approach to Armenian-Turkish relations. One of my main criticisms of TARC and the Protocols process, as well as other negotiative dialogue processes, is that by their structures and the nature of dialogue, they depend on the interlocutors having equal power. Only in such a situation can dialogue lead to genuine exchange. But, even before the 1915 genocide, Armenians vis-à-vis the Ottoman state and Turkish people in the Ottoman Empire were not equals. There had never been equality between Armenians and Turks, and the genocide only maximized the inequality that previously existed,¹⁹ rendering it what might be termed “hyper-asymmetry” or “hyper-domination.” Even at the personal, informal level, this asymmetry of identities has force. Whether on the grandest, most official, political stage or the smallest, most localized and personal, if the asymmetry is not explicitly addressed, then mutuality is not possible; on the contrary, the dialogue process actually functions to reinforce, consolidate, and even increase the degree of the asymmetry. Dialogue is always a profound risk for the dominated side; under the condition of asymmetry, even apparent gains for victim groups are made through the largess of the dominant group and are thus more a matter of luck than a product of the value of the process itself. On their side, those in the dominant group risk only some unpleasant emotions at having their views challenged, as the dominated have no power to affect them materially.

It is for this reason that Armenians across the world rejected the Protocols; they recognized that entering into the relation defined by the Protocols not only would not address the outstanding harms of the Armenian Genocide but would further weaken an already vulnerable dominated group. TARC disintegrated because the Turkish side had the power to simply reject the veracity of the Armenian Genocide, the historical impact of which was what caused the need for TARC in the first place.

Even though it does recognize some level of asymmetry and so is half-way to an adequately developed equity-based model of dialogue, Akçam’s proposal in *Dialogue Across an International Divide* does not provide a dialogue structure that could balance the asymmetry and address the vulnerability of Armenians.²⁰ What is as impressive as it is fascinating is that his efforts before and since *Dialogue* have enacted precisely the equity-based model of dialogue he does not fully articulate in his 2001 work. Indeed, his relationships with me and other Armenians seem to have

¹⁹Theriault, “Post-Genocide Imperial Domination”: 6.

²⁰Theriault, “From Unfair to Shared Burden”: 141.

organically generated a very successful model that goes beyond dialogue, to the creation of teamwork and trust. I do not mean to suggest a lack of intentionality or planning on his part, but that his approach was not to impose a model of interconnection onto the fraught Armenian-Turkish relationship, but to engage me and others in such a manner that relationships could grow up from a strong foundation. An obvious example of how he did this is his reaction to the publication in which I criticized his dialogue model. Instead of reacting as a typical academic might and treating me henceforward as an enemy or, at least, not worthy of a relationship, Akçam treated me as a worthwhile interlocutor. This was not, I believe, a function of the Turkish equivalent toward Armenians of white guilt toward African Americans in the United States; he did not defer to me or change his views simply because I was Armenian. On the contrary, because of the tremendously solid scholarly nature of his work, he could be confident of it regardless of criticisms while still being open to discussion and warranted change. To overstep even more than I already have, I experienced subsequent interactions as assuming—not granting—my equality in a way that precisely balanced the asymmetry in which we both had been thrust through no action or fault of our own.

It is through this experience, and not study of many scholarly and popular texts on Armenian-Turkish relations, that I have learned the most about dialogue possibilities and been changed through the relational process. As great a scholar as he is, one of Akçam's most significant contributions has been to enact in lived reality, rather than theorized ideas, a viable, productive approach to Armenian-Turkish relations on both the personal and scholarly levels. Given his profound ill-treatment by Turkish state authorities and those aligned with them, this is unlikely to result in any major political progress. But it has, in the scholarly realm, led to the, again, *organic* development of not just Turkish-Armenian relations but solidarity. Even though we might hold different views about issues such as territorial reparations, we are still part of a respectful process based on common cause and trust. I could name a number of Armenians, Turks, and others who have become part of Akçam's experiment, but hesitate to presume to characterize their experiences for them. Yet, they would perhaps agree that Akçam succeeded in transforming disagreement from a manifestation of Turkish efforts to control discourse on Armenian issues and thus a blockage point, into an opportunity for trust-building as well as intellectual growth and scholarly insight. By rejecting the position of the authoritative Turkish scholar adopted by too many others and at the

same time maintaining his commitment to his own scholarly process and its fruits, Akçam was able to foster a new space of Armenian-Turkish relations beyond what had been achieved in any other context.

In 2009, I penned an opinion piece in praise of true Turkish progressives like Akçam for setting an example even Armenians should follow.²¹ While it is true that his power as a Turk to have chosen whether or not to concern himself with the Armenian Genocide is a privilege that Armenians do not have, as turning our back on history does nothing to mitigate its profound effects on us even today, it is just as true that engaging the genocide was and is a moral *choice* that Akçam has willingly made. And, despite the legal challenges, public attacks, periods of exile from his homeland, and expressions of hatred and threats of violence against him it has entailed, Akçam has continued to affirm that choice every day for decades. In a society in which non-Native Americans are unlikely to experience anything akin to such reprisals in response to advocating for recognition and repair of Native American genocides, how many Armenian Americans take a stand for what is right? How many stand in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement or for providing a haven for undocumented immigrants who bear a striking similarity to their own parents, grandparents, or great grandparents? Some certainly do, but many do not—and it would require so little risk to do so. I very much appreciate that I have come far enough in my thinking, in no small part due to Akçam, that I can see in a Turkish person a model to aspire to.

Unfortunately, yet another test has appeared on the horizon. More and more the actions and rhetoric of the Turkish and Azerbaijani leaders, who began outright war against Armenians in 2020, take the form of the attitudes and behaviors that led to and characterized the genocide of 1915. With every new incursion into Armenian Republic lands, with every destruction of an Armenian church in Artsakh, with every fabricated proclamation about Armenian commission of genocide against Azeris, Talat, Enver, and Cemal's fantasy of the final end of Armenians in Asia

²¹ Henry C. Theriault, "Where Do We Go from Here? Rethinking the Challenge of the Armenian Genocide and Progressive Turkish Politics," *The Armenian Weekly April 2009 Magazine*, April 18, 2009, at <https://armenianweekly.com/2009/04/18/where-do-we-go-from-here-rethinking-the-challenge-of-the-armenian-genocide-and-progressive-turkish-politics/> (accessed March 29, 2022).

Minor—and around the world—becomes more and more real. Despite Akçam's decades of efforts and whatever one's criticisms of Armenians, it is becoming all too clear that another phase in their century-plus process of destruction has begun. Fortunately, Taner Akcam has provided some key tools against realization of that destruction.

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