

Imprisonment of Human Rights Activist Puts Turkish Establishment on the Dock

By [Muriel Mirak-Weissbach](#)

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When Turkish authorities seized Dogan Akhanli on August 10 on his arrival from Frankfurt at the Istanbul airport and threw him into prison, they may have thought they could proceed unhindered, with the law on their side. But they miscalculated utterly. As soon as the news circulated, human rights activists, intellectuals, and political figures denounced his arrest and demanded his immediate release.

Akhanli, a renowned and respected Turkish writer, had served time in jail in his homeland between 1985-87, and been tortured, because of his opposition to the military regime. In 1991 he succeeded in fleeing the country for Germany which accorded him asylum and then citizenship. Turkey had rescinded all citizenship rights. Since then he has been living and working in Cologne as a human rights activist with his own Turkish association.

He flew to Istanbul on August 10 for the first time since his emigration to visit his ageing and ailing father. Upon his arrest at the airport, friends and lawyers, who had been alerted to the possibility of such a development, moved to protect his rights. Under pressure from the German embassy, Turkish authorities agreed to expedite procedures to put him on trial in early September. Since August 20, when the story broke in the international press, the heat has mounted on Ankara to release him – a move that would be desirable not only on legal and humanitarian grounds, but also from the standpoint of political expediency.

The entire affair is a farce, and could cost the Turkish government – which strives to present itself as a model of democratization in its bid for European Union membership — a pretty penny. For the charges against Akhanli are not only hoked up, but the pseudo-legal argument backing them up is as full of holes as classical Swiss cheese.

The official accusation is that Akhanli, back in 1989, took part in armed robbery at a currency exchange booth, during which one person died. His defense attorneys, Haydar Erol (Istanbul) and Ilias Uyar (Cologne) have dismissed the charges out of hand and with good reason: it turns out the key witness who allegedly identified Akhanli in 1992 had been tortured under questioning, a fact later confirmed and documented by medical expertise. Another witness, son of the victim, after having been shown a series of photos of Akhanli – and only Akhanli – capitulated to pressure and said that perhaps he might be one of the aggressors. Such procedures in any court of law worth the name would be thrown out as ludicrous, if not blasphemous. On August 13, when the police heard the witness again, he and his brother put on the record that they could not identify Akhanli as the aggressor. That notwithstanding, the magistrate rejected Dogan's lawyers' appeal against arrest on August 20 and had him moved to a prison in Tekirdag (on the northern shore of the Sea of Marmora). On September 1, they rejected the appeal for the third time. As things now stand,

his trial should begin in September. Legal advisors and friends are optimistic that the entire charade can be guided to a rapid conclusion, and Akhanli freed.

Who is Dogan Akhanli?

The charges mounted against Dogan are, as indicated, flimsy. In any legitimate court of law, they would be thrown out *toute suite*. But here we are dealing with politics not law. And the identity of the accused is of utmost relevance.

Dogan Akhanli, whom I have known for quite some time, is a soft-spoken, mild-mannered, modest person, author of works that have earned him various prizes. His novel, *Die Richter des jüngsten Gerichts* (The Judges of the Last Judgment) was the first work by a Turkish writer that dealt with the issue of the 1915 Armenian genocide. This and his later work, the *Last Dream of the Madonna*, earned him literary prizes; Turkish literary critics chose the latter as one of the ten best novels of the year 2005 and in 2009 he received the literary prize of the newspaper *Hürriyet*.

Dogan is also a political activist. He has intervened to demand an investigation into the murder of Armenian-Turkish editor Hrant Dink. He has taken on a total, personal commitment to a noble cause: to review, reexamine, and study in depth the history of certain critical conflict situations, and, through research and elaboration of events, seek to bring the parties in conflict to understanding and reconciliation. His main focus has been on applying historical research to seek dialogue and understanding among Turks, Armenians, Kurds, and Germans regarding the 1915 genocide against the Armenians. It is in this context that I, an Armenian-American living in Germany, and daughter of two 1915 orphans, came into contact with him and his organization. His association in Cologne, *Tüday*, has dedicated its meagre resources to organizing impressive seminars, lectures, conferences, and excursions, to educate members of all those affected groups as to what actually happened back in 1915. In late July, he organized an educational trip to Berlin, showing participants from various ethnic backgrounds landmarks of Kurdish life in the capital, the Turkish cemetery where several Young Turk leaders lie buried, the Holocaust, and so forth.

Over the past year Dogan and I have been in a discussion process with others, aimed at bringing into being an association of Germans, Kurds, Armenians, and Turks living in this country ("Projekt 2015"), committed to overcoming the historical trauma of the 1915 genocide, and charting a course of reconciliation and cooperation.

I venture to hypothesize that one of the reasons why Dogan has been unlawfully arrested and charged with a crime he never committed is that he has dared to engage in such a process. Not only: but that he has succeeded with his Cologne and Berlin initiatives in forging such a dialogue among the relevant circles. The news of his arrest has already galvanized a movement in Germany, where virtually all leading newspapers have publicized the facts of the bizarre case and several national political figures have demanded his immediate release. Protest actions including demonstrations in front of the Turkish embassy in Berlin are on the agenda.

This is something the Turkish authorities in Germany, and in Ankara too, cannot easily afford. Their political credibility as partners with Europe – indeed, candidates to enter the EU — cannot withstand such discredit as would come with a brutal Stalin-style show trial against a man who has dedicated his life in Germany to seeking historical justice and

reconciliation.

So, it is ultimately not Dogan who is on the dock, but the Turkish establishment. Were he to be convicted by a kangaroo court, there would be an outcry especially in Germany, the country which hosts the largest Turkish community outside Turkey, and which weighs in heavily in any discussion of EU membership. And yet, to reduce the question to a pragmatic question of EU membership is to miss the deeper point. Dogan Akhanli has put his finger on a festering sore in the Turkish consciousness, and has shown the way whereby Turkey and the Turkish people may confront, work through, and overcome the wretched heritage of the Young Turk past. If the authorities were capable of grasping the import of his message, and the advantage it holds for their nation, they would act to set him free.

The author can be reached at mirak.weissbach@googlemail.com

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