

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 1668

October 18, 2007

Armenian Genocide Resolution Bad for U.S. Middle East Policy

Ariel Cohen, Ph.D., Owen Graham, and Garrett Murch

On October 10, the House Foreign Affairs Committee voted 27–21 to approve a non-binding resolution stating that the death of 1.5 million Armenians in the former Ottoman Empire constituted genocide. The resolution (H. Res. 106: Affirmation of the United States Record on the Armenian Genocide Resolution), has 214 co-sponsors, the majority of them Democrats. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D–CA), who represents California’s Bay area, is an ardent supporter of the resolution.

The timing for this resolution could not be more troubling, as evidenced by violent protests in Ankara, Turkey, and a recall of the Turkish Ambassador for consultations immediately following the committee vote. If brought to a vote before the full House, Congress would further strain an already fragile relationship with a key Middle Eastern ally, while severely endangering vital U.S. security interests in the greater Middle East. In particular, such a vote would endanger the safety and security of Coalition troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. This resolution stokes nationalist fervor and does nothing to further reconciliation efforts between Armenians and Turks, as both peoples are amenable to dialogue.

A Tragic History. From 1915 to 1923, many Armenians were deported from Anatolia, in present day Turkey, into Syria’s Derzor Desert, and slaughtered along the way. Turkish troops and Kurdish militants left many to die of thirst, hunger, heat, and exhaustion. As the result, 1.5 million perished. Yet, the opinions of Armenian and Turkish scholars differ widely on this narrative. Turks, for example, claim that Armenians rebelled behind the Turkish lines

and sided with the Russian Empire during World War I. The atrocities, Turkish scholars say, were the result of putting down a domestic rebellion.

The fact remains that it was the Young Turks government of the dying Ottoman Empire, and not the current government of Turkey, that was largely responsible for this tragedy. Regardless, these atrocities should be fully acknowledged. Those pushing the Armenian Genocide resolution, however, appear more determined to reopen nearly century-old wounds than to engage a modern, secular, and strategically important Middle Eastern state, Turkey.

A Blow to U.S. Foreign Policy. Given the obvious complications this resolution creates for U.S. Middle East policy, it is reasonable to question what led to its consideration at such an inauspicious time. Throughout and after the Cold War, the bipartisan majority among the American foreign policy community supported the robust U.S.–Turkish bilateral relationship and security cooperation. After all, Turkey has the second largest standing military force in NATO after the United States.

Lawmakers need to heed the advice of the eight former Secretaries of State who have said, according to *The New York Times*, that passing the resolution

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/MiddleEast/wm1668.cfm

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002–4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

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“could endanger our national security interests in the region, including our troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, and damage efforts to promote reconciliation between Turkey and Armenia.” At the same time, Turkey’s pro-Western secular elites often supported causes unpopular with much of their constituencies, including participation in the 1991 Gulf War coalition. In turn, successive U.S. administrations supported Turkey’s bid for European Union membership and blocked a slew of Armenian genocide resolutions in Congress. In short, Turkey was seen as a staunch U.S. ally.

This perception began to change as Turkey’s new conservative religious elite, more suspicious of the West, began formulating a different foreign policy, signaling that the U.S. may lose the level of support from Turkey for its Middle East policies that it had in the past. To wit, the Turkish Parliament failed to deliver a crucial transit authorization of the U.S. 4th Armored Division to move from Turkish Mediterranean ports to northern Iraq on the eve of the 2003 Iraq War. This action, coupled with the growing influence of the moderately Islamist AK Party and rapprochement with Iran and the Muslim world, has dealt a blow to some Americans’ trust in Turkey as a key U.S. ally. In the meantime, the Turkish elite and popular opinion, fostered by media and popular culture, have turned increasingly anti-U.S.

However, the bilateral relationship between the United States and Turkey is still of vital importance to U.S. Middle East policy. Turkey continues to play key roles in U.S.-led coalition efforts to win the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and may become an important player in future efforts to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

Blowback. Were the resolution to pass the full House, the consequences to U.S. interests would be disastrous. When the French Parliament voted in 2006 to make the denial of the Armenian genocide a crime, Turkey responded by severing all military ties with France and refused to contract numerous French companies.

An aide to Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has already told Turkish media that Turkey may have to “cut logistical support to the U.S.” This is a serious threat. The Incirlik Air Base in southern Turkey is a major cargo hub for U.S. and

allied forces going in and out of Iraq and Afghanistan. Seventy-four percent of all air cargo and 25 percent of all fuel transit to Iraq passes through this base. Additionally, C-17 cargo planes delivering military supplies to U.S. soldiers in Iraq fly through Incirlik to avoid dangerous land convoy routes. Logistical support also includes military overflights that support Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. A cut in Turkish support to these operations would severely cripple U.S. war efforts and permanently damage relations with an important NATO ally.

Complicating matters, on October 17, the Turkish Parliament voted 507–19 to authorize cross-border offensive strikes against PKK Kurdish separatist rebels in northern Iraq. While selected incursions into northern Iraq are not new, an increase in their size and frequency can only have a destabilizing effect in what has to date been a relatively peaceful region of Iraq. Further consideration of the Armenian Genocide resolution would diminish much-needed U.S. leverage in persuading Turkey to forbear incursions into Iraq as it addresses the real and ongoing threat posed to it by the PKK.

Conclusion. With war efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan in the balance, lawmakers should take care not to undermine vital and sensitive American foreign policy goals. As House Minority Whip Roy Blunt (R–MO) recently said, “Moving this disastrous bill to the House floor would absolutely contradict that promise [to renew longstanding alliances that have advanced our national security interests] and demonstrate a wholesale lack of judgment on matters related to foreign policy and national security.”

Those who have criticized the Bush administration for weakening America by alienating its allies should recognize that this resolution would do just that.

—Ariel Cohen, Ph.D., is Senior Research Fellow for Russian and Eurasian Studies and International Energy Security at The Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, Owen Graham is Research Assistant for the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, and Garrett Murch is House Relations Deputy Director for Government Relations, at The Heritage Foundation.