

Armenian Genocide Folly

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Articles & Testimony

U.S.-Turkish relations, already battered since the Iraq war, face a new challenge this spring: the "Armenian genocide" resolution. This resolution, introduced Jan. 30 in the House of Representatives, will likely come to the floor soon.

If passed in the House, the resolution would sever the bilateral ties between Washington and Ankara. The resolution would also be the Democratic majority's first foreign-policy blunder in the new Congress. At this critical juncture of spiraling instability in Iraq and a resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan, the United States cannot afford to lose Turkey, a major, if underappreciated, partner for U.S. operations in Iraq and Afghanistan alike.

An overwhelming number of Turks say that the 1915 deportation of Armenians from Anatolia to Syria in the Ottoman Empire does not constitute genocide, yet the House resolution declares 1915 to be a genocide. By passing the resolution, the Congress would be passing judgment on Turkish history, which the Turks would see as the ultimate insult. This is bad news at a time when America's favorability rating in Turkish opinion polls is already at an all-time low of 7 percent.

The House resolution would cause a massive public outpouring of Turkish resentment against the United States. This backlash would inevitably cripple U.S.-Turkish military cooperation.

In November 2006, the French parliament passed a resolution declaring 1915 a genocide. The Turkish response was unforgiving and harsh, especially in the military sphere. Turkey halted bilateral military exchanges and froze all reciprocal military visits and joint military exercises with France. Paris was barred from bidding for Turkish defense contracts, and on their own initiative Turkish generals whom France had honored returned their decorations.

The likely similar Turkish response to the passage of the Armenian resolution would have a devastating effect on U.S. plans, especially in Iraq.

For starters, the Incirlik Air Base in southern Turkey, an invaluable asset for U.S. military operations in the Middle East, would come under pressure. Three-quarters of all air cargo bound for Iraq transits Incirlik, and Turkey provides blanket clearance for military overflights supporting Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. For instance, KC-135 tankers operating out of Incirlik have flown 3,400 sorties and delivered 35 million gallons of fuel to U.S. fighter and transport aircraft on missions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

With its proximity to Iraq, Incirlik also helps defray the cost of American operations there. Six U.S. C-17 cargo aircraft based at Incirlik do the job of nine or 10 military aircraft based in Germany, saving the United States \$160 million per year.

In September 2000, when another Armenian resolution was submitted to Congress, more than 10,000 Turks demonstrated outside Incirlik, shutting down the base for three days. U.S. military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan cannot afford a repeat of demonstrations that close the airbase.

In addition to Incirlik, the Habur border gate between Turkey and Iraq is another critical supply line. Turkey is the

only developed economy bordering Iraq, and the provision of goods and services from Turkey to Iraq through Habur is of crucial importance. Though Iraq is rich in oil reserves, its crippled infrastructure requires Iraq to import gas from Turkey. Half of the fuel used by Iraqi consumers enters Iraq through Habur. Turkey also provides 19 percent of Iraq's food and water, and will soon supply 25 percent of its electricity. Habur is also vital for the U.S. military because one-quarter of the fuel used by coalition troops enters Iraq from Turkey via Habur.

The passage of the Armenian resolution would also hurt U.S. businesses and consumers. Ankara is engaged in several major defense cooperation projects with the United States, including the Joint Strike Fighter, in which Turkey has \$175 million invested and an expected purchase of 100 jets, and the upgrading of 200-plus Turkish F-16 fighters at a cost of \$1.6 billion. The Armenian resolution would jeopardize such cooperative projects, as well as kill a number of pending Turkish defense purchases from the United States, including Patriot PAC III Air Defense System for \$1.3 billion, 52 Sikorsky Black Hawks helicopters at a value of \$800 million, 10 heavy-lift Boeing and Sikorsky helicopters worth \$500 million and between 30 and 50 Boeing Apache or Bell Cobra helicopters worth between \$1.5 and \$2 billion.

Passing the Armenian resolution would spark a major bilateral crisis that would be detrimental to American interests. The United States needs Turkey in Afghanistan. Whether in the end it opts for a smart surge or a staged withdrawal, the United States cannot succeed in Iraq without Turkish assets. The Bush administration and the Democrat-led Congress both should be interested in preventing an Armenian train wreck in Iraq. In today's hyperpartisan Washington, this spectacle should be a refreshing opportunity for bipartisan agreement.

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