

Congress, Genocide, and a Turkish Rift

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The mass killing of up to 1.5 million ethnic Armenians by Ottoman Turks in 1915 is one of the darkest moments of the twentieth century. It continues to reverberate almost one hundred years later. The U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee's narrow vote on March 4 to acknowledge those massacres as genocide could undermine relations with the Republic of Turkey, a critical strategic U.S. partner in Iraq, Afghanistan, Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Balkans, and the Middle East.

If the non-binding resolution goes to the entire House and is passed, the fallout for U.S.-Turkey relations will be significant. It will likely further complicate the normalization of Turkish-Armenian ties and ultimately set back Turkey's own scrutiny of the events in 1915, which many scholars agree was genocide.

The Foreign Affairs Committee passed similar resolutions recognizing the Armenian genocide in 2005 and 2007 by far wider margins of support, only to be stalled and ultimately withdrawn over concern about U.S.-Turkey bilateral ties. Both times, Ankara signaled that passage by the full House would lead to a deterioration of bilateral ties. Ankara has already recalled its new ambassador to the United States, and lawmakers should expect Turkey to reconsider Washington's use of Incirlik Air Base--an important logistics hub for U.S. forces going

into and potentially out of Iraq. It could also possibly downgrade its role in Afghanistan, which is unpopular in Turkey anyway.

The House's action would also make it even more difficult to convince the Turks, who hold a non-permanent UN Security Council seat, to support a new round of sanctions on Iran. Given important economic issues, in particular the large amount of natural gas that Turkey imports from Iran, getting Ankara onboard for punitive actions against Tehran was already going to be a challenge, but an Armenian genocide resolution would make it nearly impossible. The Foreign Affairs Committee's decision will also do much to further impair the image of the United States in Turkey. Unlike many countries around the globe, Turkey has not experienced a positive "Obama effect."

Turkey and Armenia achieved a breakthrough in relations last summer and the initialing of protocols for the normalization of relations between Ankara and Yerevan. Yet nationalist politics on both sides, and the continued Armenian occupation of the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan, a close ally of Turkey, have impeded the ratification of the protocols. Turkey is likely to put ties with Armenia in a deep freeze should the House move forward with the genocide resolution. This is unfortunate not only because of the new round of tension that is likely to result, but also because Armenia, which has posted strong macroeconomic growth rates in the last five years, would lose out on the expected boost from access to the Turkish economy and investment.

Finally, although Turkish society is often portrayed (for good reason) as insular and nationalist, the reality is far more complex and nuanced. As Turkey has become more modern and democratic, important voices have emerged to challenge long-held orthodoxies.

Over the last few years, a number of journalists and academics have begun to question the official narrative of the events of 1915 to try to come to terms with the Armenian question. These individuals have come to recognize that the perennial neuralgia of the Armenian

genocide is not good for either Turkey's foreign relations or domestic politics. It is important to underscore that this opening has been modest at best and is vulnerable to political shocks. The nationalist backlash that is likely to come with congressional recognition of the Armenian genocide will effectively shut down this inchoate dialogue, indefinitely delaying Turkey's own efforts to come to grips with the events of 1915.