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The Armenian genocide

Past imperfect, present tense

Congress reconsiders America's official position on the Armenian genocide

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TWO questions faced an American congressional panel on Thursday March 5th as it considered the mass killings of Armenians during and after the first world war by forces of the Ottoman Empire. First, was it genocide? The historical debate is as hot, and unsettled, as ever. Armenians continue to insist that it was the first genocide of the twentieth century, while Turks call the killings merely part of the chaos of the break-up of empire.

But the second question on the minds of congressmen in the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Representatives was more urgent.

What is more important, fidelity to history or concern for the present? The vote took place as warming relations between Turkey and Armenia have cooled again and those between Turkey and America are under increasing strain over Iran, Israel and other affairs in the region. Turkish diplomats and politicians gave warning before the vote that the consequences would be felt across the range of issues of shared concern to the two countries. In the end the panel narrowly decided against pragmatism and chose to set straight the historical records. A resolution recognising the killings as genocide was sent to the House by a vote of 23 to 22.

When the same House committee passed a "genocide" resolution in 2007 the White House urged that the vote be scrapped. But this year, it had come with a twist; Barack Obama had promised during his election campaign to recognise the event as genocide. But before the vote his advisers said that while he acknowledges a genocide personally, he urged unsuccessfully that official interpretation be left to the parties involved. Congress is far more sensitive to lobbying than the president and to small but highly motivated groups of voters. Lobbyists working for both Armenians and Turks had been active before the vote and Armenians are concentrated in several Californian districts.

But no fashioner of foreign policy—among whom the president is by far the most important—can ignore the strategic importance of Turkey. It is a vital American ally and has the second-biggest army in NATO. The country is home to an important American air base and is a crucial supply route for America's forces in Iraq. Relations were difficult even before the beginning of the war in Iraq in 2003. The mildly Islamist government denied the Americans the ability to open a second front in Iraq through Turkey. Turkey's relationship with Israel has deteriorated too. Israel's two recent wars, in Lebanon and Gaza, have outraged Turkish public opinion. Mr Obama's more even-handed approach to the Israel-Palestine conflict has improved America's reputation in Turkey, but not by much.



Turkey itself is caught between forces that make the Armenia issue potentially dangerous. The country's secular, Western-oriented politicians, among others, have been discouraged by the strict terms offered by the European Union for eventual Turkish membership. In part as a result there has been a gradual realignment in Turkish foreign policy towards its more immediate neighbours. Turkey's government seeks peaceful relations with countries at its borders, which has meant some cosying up to Iran, despite the fact that most of Turkey's NATO allies are pushing for more sanctions against the Islamic republic over its alleged efforts to obtain nuclear weapons.

The vote comes at a sensitive time, too, for Turkey's relations with Armenia. The pair have been at odds since Turkey closed the border in 1993, during Armenia's war with Turkey's ethnic cousins in Azerbaijan. Last year, protocols were agreed that foresaw an establishment of diplomatic relations and an opening of the border. But Armenia's highest court then declared that the protocols were in line with Armenia's constitutionally mandated policy that foreign affairs conform to the Armenian view of the genocide. Turkey responded with fury and the protocols were endangered. The American vote will anger Turkey further and perhaps make it even more inclined to turn away

from Europe, America and Armenia in favour of its Islamic neighbours.

One hope is that Turkish anger will subside if, as happened in 2007, the House leadership stops the resolution from reaching a full vote. It may do so again. Turkey recalled its ambassador after Thursday's vote just as in 2007. The Turkish government, in a spat with the country's nationalist army, may play the foreign-insult card to bolster its domestic strength. But ultimately the Turks are unlikely to weaken their relationship with America lightly.