

Bush condemns House vote on Armenian genocide

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The Bush administration and the Turkish government have denounced the action of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, which adopted a resolution Wednesday branding the massacres of Armenians in Turkey from 1915 to 1923 as genocide and calling on the US government to officially recognize this as an historical fact.

The resolution was adopted by a 27-21 vote that cut across party lines—19 Democrats and 8 Republicans voted for the measure, while 13 Republicans and 8 Democrats voted against. The resolution could come to a vote in the House of Representatives as early as Friday, and passage there seems assured, since there are 226 co-sponsors, more than a majority of the House.

The resolution is non-binding and thus has no legal effect on US government policy. It is also less likely to pass the Senate, where only 32 of 100 senators have agreed to co-sponsor the bill, far fewer than the 60 votes required to overcome a filibuster and force a vote.

Despite the purely symbolic character of the resolution, however, the Bush administration is waging a ferocious campaign to defeat it. Bush made an appearance in the White House Rose Garden just before the House committee vote, telling the press, “This resolution is not the right response to these historic mass killings, and its passage would do great harm to our relations with a key ally in NATO and in the global war on terror.”

These sentiments were echoed by Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who each issued statements warning that the House action would worsen US relations with Turkey.

Gates pointed out that 70 percent of all air cargo sent to Iraq passes through Turkey, as well as 30 percent of fuel and nearly all armored vehicles. He said that US officials in occupied Iraq “believe clearly that access to airfields and to the roads and so on in Turkey would be very much put at risk if this resolution passes and the Turks react as strongly as we believe they will.”

The Turkish government cut off military cooperation with France last year after the French parliament adopted legislation to make denial of the Armenian genocide a criminal offense, on a par with denial of the Nazi Holocaust.

The US foreign policy establishment was mobilized on a

bipartisan basis to oppose the bill, with all eight living former secretaries of state signing a joint statement to that effect. This includes Democrats Madeleine Albright and Warren Christopher as well as Republicans Henry Kissinger, Alexander Haig, George Shultz, Lawrence Eagleburger, James Baker and Colin Powell.

Passage of the resolution by the House committee touched off a storm of protest in Turkey, with tens of thousands participating in nationalist demonstrations denouncing the proposed US congressional action. Turkey withdrew its ambassador, Nabi Sensoy, who had attended the House committee meeting at the head of a delegation of Turkish legislators.

The government of Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan issued a statement declaring, “It is not possible to accept such an accusation of a crime which was never committed by the Turkish nation.” It criticized the House committee, both for allegedly rewriting history and for interfering in “a matter which specifically concerns the common history of Turks and Armenians.”

Officials in Ankara said that if the full House of Representatives adopted the resolution, Turkey might reconsider its support for US military operations in Iraq, including shipments of supplies and the stationing of US warplanes at the Incirlik air base.

The Turkish foreign ministry issued a statement calling the resolution “an irresponsible move, which comes at a greatly sensitive time.” This was a reference to the growing tensions along the Iraq-Turkish border in the wake of a series of clashes between Turkish troops and Kurdish guerrillas loyal to the separatist PKK (Kurdish Workers Party).

Kurdish fighters killed 13 Turkish soldiers Sunday in Sirnak province, the worst cross-border incident since the US overthrow of Saddam Hussein, and the Turkish army has mobilized tanks and troops in a position to invade northern Iraq. The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) decided Tuesday to seek parliamentary authorization for such an invasion, although it has not yet decided to give the order.

The Bush administration is concerned, not only about a potential clash between Turkish and Kurdish forces within US-occupied Iraq, but about a broader destabilizing effect

throughout the Middle East and the Caucasus. This region is the most explosive in the world, with ongoing conflicts between Russians and Chechens, Russia and Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, Turkey and Kurdish rebels, Israel and Syria, and between Iran and the US occupation forces in Iraq—to say nothing of the ongoing bloodbath in Iraq itself.

Eastern Turkey, site of both the Armenian genocide 92 years ago and the Kurdish guerrilla warfare today, is also transected by the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline, a critical element in the US strategy to obtain access to the vast oil and gas resources of the Caspian Sea. The pipeline, built under US auspices as an alternative to the Russian pipeline system, begins in the Azerbaijan capital and passes through Georgia and eastern Turkey to the port of Ceyhan on the Mediterranean Sea.

It is, of course, the height of hypocrisy for the US House of Representatives to pronounce against a 92-year-old genocide while continuing to fund an imperialist war of aggression which has taken as many lives as the anti-Armenian pogroms during and after World War I. According to a recent survey by the British polling organization ORB, some 1.2 million Iraqis have died violently since the US invasion in March 2003. Historians have estimated the death toll in the Armenian massacres as between 500,000 and 1.5 million.

There is little argument that what took place in eastern Turkey between 1915 and 1923 constituted the first case of genocide in the twentieth century, an event that both Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin studied and drew lessons from. Hitler is said to have remarked, as he ordered the beginning of mass extermination of Jews in occupied Poland, “Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?” Stalin emulated the methods of the Turkish regime in his mass deportations of Chechens, Volga Germans and other ethnic groups deemed potentially disloyal in World War II.

In the wake of Turkey’s defeat in 1915 by Russian armies on the Caucasus front, one of the early campaigns of World War I, the Turkish government ordered the mass expulsion of the entire Armenian population from its ancestral homeland which overlapped the Russo-Turkish border. The Armenians, largely Christian, were considered a pro-Russian fifth column and blamed for the Turkish military setbacks.

The massacres were touched off by the arrest and killing of hundreds of Armenian nationalists and intellectuals in a government crackdown on April 24, 1915. Hundreds of thousands of Armenians subsequently died, some killed by Turkish troops or lynched in pogroms, more dying of starvation, exposure or heat under conditions of forced marches from the mountains down into the Mesopotamian desert (what is now Syria and western Iraq).

Press accounts in the last few days have distorted what took place beginning in 1915, describing it as an atrocity carried out by the Ottoman Empire, although it was actually ordered by the Young Turks. These military officers seized power in 1908, reducing the Ottoman sultan to figurehead status, and

advocated a program of aggressive Turkish nationalism. They were the political mentors of Kemal Ataturk, founder of the secular Turkish republic in 1923, and there is a direct line of continuity to the Kemalist military establishment in contemporary Turkey.

This political continuity is at the root of the ongoing denial of the Armenian genocide, a central tenet of Turkish bourgeois nationalism, embraced particularly by the military brass and the fascist “Grey Wolves.” Acknowledging the Armenian genocide is still a criminal offense in Turkey, for which the Nobel prize-winning author Orhan Pamuk was put on trial in Istanbul in 2005. In January of this year, Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink was shot to death by a young Turkish fascist in Istanbul for writing about the mass murders.

The US congressional resolution is not motivated by any principled concern with these tragic historical events, however. In part, there is the desire to curry favor with the Armenian-American lobby, influential in California, home to most Armenian-Americans. All ten members of the Foreign Affairs Committee from California, Democrats and Republicans, voted for the resolution.

There is another more sinister factor, expressed in the comments of Congressman Brad Sherman of California, a Democrat and major sponsor of the bill. Citing the possibility of US-backed military intervention in the Darfur region of the Sudan, Sherman said, “If we hope to stop future genocides we need to admit to those horrific acts of the past.” He dismissed the significance of the Turkish reaction, saying, “We will get a few angry words out of Ankara for a few days, and then it’s over.”

Another Democrat gave voice to the anti-Muslim bigotry that lies just below the surface in such discussions, declaring, in response to warnings of the possible impact on US military operations, “I feel like I have a Turkish sword over my head.”

The prize for cynicism and hypocrisy must go to Senator Hillary Clinton, who is a co-sponsor of the Senate version of the Armenian genocide resolution, although President Bill Clinton blocked the last such measure in the House of Representatives in 2000. Her husband prevailed on then Speaker Dennis Hastert to shelve a scheduled vote on the grounds that provoking an anti-American reaction in Turkey would cause considerable damage to US foreign policy interests.



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