

US-Turkey tensions mount over resolution on Armenian genocide

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Last Friday, the Foreign Affairs Committee of the US House of Representatives passed a resolution by a slim 23-22 majority defining the actions of the Ottoman Empire against the Armenian population in 1915 as “genocide.” This was then followed by Turkey recalling its ambassador from Washington. In addition, Ankara summoned the US ambassador. The resolution is an expression of tensions between the US and Israel, on the one hand, and Turkey on the other.

Subsequently, Democratic lawmakers agreed not to schedule a full vote on the resolution, and House leaders have no plans at this time for a full House vote on the measure, apparently reflecting concerns within the Obama administration.

Most international historians recognise that what took place under the government of the nationalist Young Turks during the First World War was genocide against the Armenians. In Turkey, however, anyone making this claim risked jail until recently. Turkey’s official interpretation of the “events” is that the Armenians fought on the side of Russia, and many of them—and just as many Turks—also died in the war. The idea that Turkey was threatened by separatism, supported from abroad, forms one of the ideological foundations of Turkish nationalism, upon which the army, state bureaucracy and all bourgeois parties have been based since the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923.

Armenian nationalism, for its part, is founded on the recognition of the genocide. Armenia, independent since 1991, and Turkey have no diplomatic relations, and the border between the two countries has been closed since 1993. A further serious point of contention is the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the region of Nagorno-Karabakh, which ended in 1994. The territory is largely populated by Armenians but is part of Azerbaijan. It is currently occupied by

Armenian troops.

Azerbaijan and Georgia have close relations with Turkey, while Armenia has links with Russia and also with Iran. Azerbaijan has significant oil and gas reserves, and Georgia is a transit country for Turkey, which in turn is a major hub for energy supplies to Europe. For a long time, the United States has been trying to build up Turkey as an alternative to Russia as an energy supply route, and to reconcile Armenia with Turkey and so remove it from Russian influence. In October of last year, the governments of Turkey and Armenia signed several protocols, which among other things provided for the opening of the border and the establishment of diplomatic relations.

The hoped-for breakthrough, however, failed to materialise. Neither Armenia nor Turkey has ratified the protocols. Azerbaijan fears being devalued in the eyes of its traditional protector, and is appealing to Turkish nationalism; it has also made it unmistakably clear to Turkey that it could deliver its gas to Russia if necessary. As a result, Turkey has demanded that Armenia make concessions on the Karabakh issue before they would sign the protocols. On the Armenian side, nationalists are agitating for the genocide issue to be discussed at a Joint Commission.

In January, the Armenian Constitutional Court ruled that the protocols were constitutional. The decision was met with outrage in Turkey. There it was interpreted as confirming that the matter of genocide did not stand for debate, and that Turkey should not interfere in relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In the US, where there has long been an influential Armenian lobby, however, the verdict seems to have been welcomed.

While newspapers in Germany and other European countries have interpreted the adoption of the Armenian resolution by the House Foreign Affairs Committee as

a setback for Obama, the Turkish media see it more as an American-Israeli attempt to exert pressure on Turkey. Turkish lobbyists tried for days to influence members of the House of Representatives. But they only received help from American arms companies, which feared they would lose lucrative contracts if the resolution were adopted and US-Turkish relations subsequently deteriorated.

Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu complained that in contrast to a similar case under Bush, the Obama administration had not stood up strongly enough for the Turkish side: “The current picture shows that an inadequate weight has been placed.” In 2007, Obama’s predecessor, George W. Bush, is said to have personally telephoned all those involved, arguing for a no vote, while the Obama administration largely remained inactive.

The *Hurriyet Daily News* cited an unnamed senior State Department official who said there were those in the US government who wanted to use the resolution as leverage against Turkey to speed up the process of normalisation with Armenia: “They perhaps wanted to give a message to Turkey to urge that, in the case of the failure of the process, they are ready with their sticks in hand.”

The paper continued: “The same source also touched on the role of the Israeli lobby during this process. ‘Our ambassador to Washington met with all prominent representatives of the Israeli lobby. They promised to give support, but when compared to the past, their support was minimal. Perhaps they also wanted to give a message to Turkey to show the damage in ties between Ankara and Tel Aviv,’ added the diplomat.”

Israeli-Turkish relations have been tense ever since the Gaza war, the brutality of which evoked great anger in the Turkish population. The Turkish government has repeatedly criticised the Israeli action, without placing in question the military pact with Israel, which has existed for almost 15 years. So far, it has been the Israeli lobby that has kept Turkey from facing a genocide resolution in the US Congress. This is despite the fact that to a considerable extent Israel justifies its existence on the basis that after the Holocaust, the greatest genocide in history, the Jews needed a place of refuge.

But it is not only because of Israel and Armenia that

there are conflicts with Turkey, which is a NATO partner of the US. The moderate Islamist government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan has so far shown little inclination to join in the American threats and accusations against its neighbour Iran, a major economic partner for Turkey. This is particularly significant since Turkey is currently a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council and also has important US military bases in the country.

Under the headline “US turns screw on Ankara over sanctions,” the *Financial Times* reported on February 25, eight days before the vote on the Armenia resolution: “Turkey has as much reason to be concerned about the prospect of a nuclear Iran as anybody,” James Steinberg, deputy US secretary of state, told the *Financial Times*.

Asked about statements from Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan calling Iran a “friend,” Mr. Steinberg added: “We do not need them to label Iran. We need them to work with us to make sure that Iran does not become nuclear weapons-capable.” The two allies needed to “find a common tactical approach” to try to achieve that objective, he said.



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