

Genocide Politics

By Khody Akhavi | October 16, 2007

The George W. Bush administration has gone on the offensive against a non-binding House resolution recognizing as “genocide” the deaths of as many as 1.5 million Armenians in the former Ottoman Empire nearly a century ago. Administration officials argue that the resolution, which has majority support in the House, could harm relations with Turkey at a particularly crucial time.

The influential House Foreign Affairs Committee, chaired by Rep. Tom Lantos (D-CA), voted 27-21 to endorse the legislation last Wednesday, despite the pleas of President Bush, who said it threatened to undermine U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East.

“We all deeply regret the tragic suffering of the Armenian people that began in 1915, but this resolution is not the right response to these historic mass killings,” said Bush. “Its passage would do great harm to our relations with a key ally in NATO and in the global war on terror.”

Armenia and Turkey have long opposed each other’s versions of events during and after World War I. Armenia claims that up to 1.5 million were murdered or starved to death as part of a systematic effort by the Turkish government to end the national liberation of the Armenian people, and it considers Turkey’s actions as “the first genocide of the 20th century.”

Turkish officials do not deny that mass killings took place but argue that the deaths resulted from widespread fighting that occurred during the collapse of the 600-year-old Ottoman Empire, clashes that also left hundreds of thousands of Muslim Turks dead.

Turkey claims that 600,000 Armenians died after they allied themselves with Russian forces invading the Ottoman Empire and maintains that they were not the victims of a government-sponsored campaign of genocide.

Last Thursday, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Defense Secretary Robert Gates issued a joint

appeal to Congress and offered to provide House members with a classified briefing to discuss what they described as the “national security interests” at stake.

Legislators who voted for the measure defended it as a stand against state-sponsored atrocities.

“I am Jewish. I have both a moral and person obligation to condemn all acts of genocide no matter where or when they occur,” said Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, an Arizona Democrat, in a statement. “Our nation’s relationship with Turkey is important. Our relationships with all other countries are important. But our relationship with humanity matters as well. I cannot vote to deny that the horrific actions of the Armenian genocide occurred.”

Turkey severed military ties with France after its parliament voted in 2006 to make the denial of the Armenian genocide a crime. Following the U.S. congressional vote this week, Ankara ordered its ambassador in Washington to return home for “consultations” but says he has not been formally withdrawn.

“A similar reaction by the elected government of Turkey to a House resolution could harm American troops in the field, constrain our ability to supply our troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, and significantly damage our efforts to promote reconciliation between Armenia and Turkey at a key turning point in their relations,” said Rice and Gates in the letter, as reviewed and reported by the Associated Press.

On Thursday, Gates warned of the “enormous implications” for U.S. military operations in Iraq if Turkey limited flights over its airspace and restricted access to Incirlik Air Base.

“All I can say is that a resolution that looks back almost 100 years to an event that took place under a predecessor government, the Ottomans, and that has enormous present day implications for American soldiers and Marines and sailors and airmen in Iraq, is something we need to take very seriously,” Gates told reporters in London.

Turkey provides significant logistical support for the U.S.-led war effort in Iraq. About 70% of all air cargo sent to Iraq passes through or comes through Turkey, as does 30% of fuel, and virtually all the new armored vehicles designed to withstand mines and bombs, according to Gates.

The legislation also comes as Turkey’s government prepares to seek permission from parliament to carry out a cross-border offensive against an estimated 3,000 to 5,000 members of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) based in northern Iraq, in retaliation for rebel attacks that have killed 29 Turkish soldiers, police, and civilians in the past two weeks.

Washington has warned that a Turkish military attack across the border in Iraq could throw into chaos the only relatively stable region of Iraq.

The PKK, an armed separatist group whose goal has been to create an independent socialist Kurdish

state, is considered a terrorist organization by the United States, Europe, and NATO, and Turkey claims it has been responsible for more than 30,000 deaths, the majority of them civilian, when it began using political violence in the early 1980s.

Turkey conducted its last major operation into Iraq in 1997.

Turkish President and head of the Islamist ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) Abdullah Gul called last Wednesday’s committee vote “unacceptable” and said, “Some politicians in the United States have once again sacrificed important matters to petty domestic politics despite all calls to common sense.”

The Armenian resolution debate has also unleashed an aggressive lobbying campaign by Ankara, which is spending more than \$300,000 a month on sophisticated public relations specialists and former Washington lawmakers to help defeat the measure.

The Turkish Embassy is paying \$100,000 a month to lobbying firm DLA Piper, which is associated with former Democratic House Majority Leader Dick Gephardt, and \$105,000 to the Livingston Group (connected to former Republican lawmaker Robert L. Livingston), and it recently paid public relations firm Fleishman-Hillard \$114,000 a month, according to records filed with the Justice Department.

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