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# **The Armenian Genocide Bill and the Turkish Reaction in Iraq**

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## **The Armenian Genocide Bill and the Turkish Reaction in Iraq**

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Tragic as the fate of the Armenians may have been in the aftermath of World War I, the fact remains that the issue is more than half a century old. Turkish-Armenian conciliation might serve an important purpose, as might any effort to reconcile Armenians, Turks, and Azerbaijanis. The dead, however, are not grateful, and stirring up new sources of ethnic and sectarian tension are the last thing the region needs.

This is particularly true when the end result is to create problems for the living. Pushing Turkey to be more hostile to Armenia is scarcely a useful goal, but Iraq and the Kurds are affected as well – along with vital US interests. As a result, the net impact of the Armenian genocide bill may well be to create yet another pointless regional source of anger against the US – this time coming from the Congress instead of the Administration.

### **Turkish Government and Military Support of the US Presence in Iraq**

Americans need to understand that the Turkish government and Turkish military have provided substantial support to the US in Iraq since the fall of Saddam Hussein. The US efforts to push Turkey into allowing US troops to invade Iraq from Turkish soil made have failed in the run up to the invasion, but Turkey has since become a key element in the conduct of US operations in Iraq.

Reporting by ABC News describes this support and the importance of the cost savings of flying cargo planes to Turkey instead of Germany -- which would become the alternate hub into Iraq if turkey closed its facilities.

- One key area of support is the movement of fuel goes through Habur Gate that is the main entryway into Iraq from Turkey. The cargo hub at Incirlik Air Base serves both Iraq and Afghanistan. 74% of air cargo into Iraq transits Incirlik. Six US military C-17 aircraft based at Incirlik move the amount of cargo it took 9-10 military aircraft to move from Germany, saving \$160 million per year.
- KC-135 tankers operating out of Incirlik have flown 3,400 sorties and delivered 35 million gallons of fuel to U.S. fighter and transport aircraft on missions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

- Approximately 25% of the fuel used by Coalition forces enters Iraq from Turkey via the Habur Gate crossing, which is the main entryway into Iraq from Turkey.
- In addition, 29% of the fuel used by Iraqi consumers -- 250,000 tankers and 1.6 billion gallons of fuel - enters through Habur Gate, despite Iraqi arrears that have approached \$1 billion.
- Turkey provides 19% of the food and water that Iraqis consume through Habur Gate.
- Turkey continues to provide blanket clearance for military over flights supporting Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan.
- Turkey exports 270 MW of electricity to northern Iraq and has plans to increase that total to 1000 MW, or 25% of Iraq's current peak capacity.
- Over 20,000 Turks have worked in Iraq since 2004, and approximately 150 (mostly truck drivers) have lost their lives in insurgent attacks. About 1,000 Turkish companies are active in Iraq.
- Turkey has authorized the temporary deployment of 32 USAF F-16's to Incirlik Air Base during January-February 2007, providing vital training and experience to the U.S. crews. A second rotational deployment is scheduled for May 2007.
- Turkey welcomed 16 US Navy ships to Turkish ports in 2006, including 9 port calls for US crewmen and 7 fuel deliveries for Coalition forces in Iraq. Six US Navy ships also made passages through the Turkish Straits on their way to/from the Black Sea. Eight to ten port calls are expected in 2007.

### **The Turkish Backlash Against the US**

As for Turkish attitudes towards the US, before the Armenian genocide bill and now – it is important that Americans understand just how concerned Turkey is with the PKK issue, and how truly hostile Turkish public opinion has become to the US since 2001 because of the perception the US is hostile to Muslims and its actions in Iraq have threatened Turkish security. The Turkish people do not support the aid the Turkish government and military have quietly given to the US.

Public opinion polls make it all too clear that Turks see the PKK issue in terms of what they estimate are nearly 30,000 casualties from PKK attacks over the years. They see the US invasion of Iraq as having created a Kurdish zone that is hostile to Turkey, the US as having blocked Turkish counterterrorism operations inside the Iraqi Kurdish zone, and the US as having increased the threat to Turkey.

A Pew survey of Global attitudes issued in July found that Turks saw terrorism as a major issue, and that the number of Turks who saw terrorism as a "very big issue" had risen from 57% in 2002 to 72% in 2007.<sup>1</sup> The survey does not separate Al Qaeda type terrorism from the PKK, but it is clear from internal Turkish surveys that non Kurds ("white" and "black" Turks) see the PKK as a major threat and terrorist movement.

In the same survey, 64% of Turks polled saw the US as the biggest global threat to Turkey -- followed by Iraq as the biggest threat (13%) and Russia (9%) while only 6% of Turks saw Iran as a major threat. The poll found that 77% Turks were very worried/somewhat worried about the US becoming a military threat to Turkey, while only 15% were "not too/not all worried." The Pew trust found that when Turks were asked to cite their closet allies, they listed Germany (13%), Pakistan (11%) and Saudi Arabia (9%).

This does not mean Turks are supporting Islamist extremism, although the level of rejection of Palestinian style suicide attacks is different. Turks fell into the mean in the Muslim world in terms of opposition to suicide bombing (56% against versus 16% some form of approval). The number showing confidence in Bin Laden dropped, however, from 15% in 2002 to only 5% in 2007. Some 42% of Turkey also saw the rise of Sunni and Shi'ite tensions as a growing problem in the world, and another 23% saw it as a growing problem limited to Iraq.

## **The Kurdish Issue**

It is far from clear what Turkey will or will not do in Iraq, and whether the US debate over the Armenian genocide bill will help reduce Turkish restraint in going into the Kurdish zone in Iraq. The US should, however, be careful not to overreact if Turkey does send forces in to the Kurdish area. Any analysis of events must focus carefully on the seriousness of what Turkish forces actually do, and be careful to put the Turkish backlash from the Armenian genocide bill in the context of the overall growth of Turkish hostility towards the US.

It is far from clear how serious yet another Turkish incursion into Iraq would actually be. Some Turkish officers -- mostly retired -- have talked recklessly about going deep into Iraq territory, and a few have talked about going to Mosul and the

Kirkuk oil fields. None of this talk has previously led to any such action on Turkey's part in the past. The fact is that the Turks have repeatedly sent significant forces into the Kurdish area after the PKK during the last two decades without any objective other than weakening or destroying the PKK.

Turkey sent forces equivalent to a small corps or several divisions into Iraq repeatedly during the Iran-Iraq War and Saddam turned a blind eye. Smaller Turkish elements -- often several battalion equivalents -- repeatedly went into the Kurdish areas from 1992-2002. There has often been a covert Turkish Special Forces elements present in the Barzani dominated area and operating against PKK forces during the periods when Turkey was not officially operating in the area.

This obviously is not a desirable solution to the problem. Iraqi sovereignty and the security of the Kurdish zone in Iraq ultimately require an Iraqi solution to the PKK problem. This explains why the US made real efforts to stop Turkish penetration after 2003, creating a firestorm in Turkey when Turkish covert units and special forces were detained or made to leave.

At the same time, the PKK presence in Iraq has steadily expanded and has become a base for recent PKK attacks on Turkey. The Turks have also attempted to work with the Kurdish government in Iraq, and do have covert liaison units. At one point, the Barzani elements of the Pesh Merga did try to operate against PKK forces. They failed and took some losses. Since that time, the Iraqi Kurds have tended to leave the PKK alone. There also seems to be some growing collusion between Kurdish elements in the ISF and border forces and the PKK.

In short, much depends on how deep the Turks go, the numbers they invade with, what they do, and how long they stay. The US, Iraqi Kurds, and Iraqi government has every reason to protest, *but* selective anti-PKK operations have a quarter of a century of precedents; the Iraqi Kurds are partially to blame; and it is far from clear just how destabilizing such Turkish action will be. It might even be positive - forcing Iraq's Kurds to realize they are far better off as Iraqis than in seeking independence or extreme versions of autonomy.

### **The Kurdish Zone in Iraq**

Americans also need to be more careful about talking about partition, or federalism that will be seen in Turkey as the near equivalent of Iraqi Kurdish independence, and the "success" of the Kurdish zone in Iraq as if Iraq's Kurds could continue to operate without being part of Iraq as a nation.

The Kurds have made very real advances since the creation of a Kurdish security zone after the end of the Gulf War, but much of their present success is not

sustainable. Moreover, Barzani vs. Talibani tensions have threatened such success on several occasions. They continue, and the Pesh Merga and Kurdish elements of the ISF are anything but united.

The Kurds had 11 years of US protection from 1992-2003 that other Iraqis lacked. During that time, they got US aid, made money off of smuggling between Iraq and other countries, and benefited from a large share of the UN oil for food money.

Since 2003, they have benefited from a large share of the US aid pie -- particularly because aid money goes into secure areas and the areas with the best lobbyists -- and from a major share of Iraq's national oil export income where they have been able to spend on civil projects far more securely than other parts of Iraq.

This kind of economic "success," however, will not be sustained when the present flood of aid and wartime spending ends, and the present sharing of oil revenues comes at a time that 80% of Iraq's oil exports come from the fields in the South. Much of the current prosperity of the Kurdish security would vanish without outside subsidies. It will also take years before -- if ever -- the oil fields actually in the current Kurdish zone could begin to sustain the present Kurdish zone economy.

The US also has good reason to be careful about any expansion of the Kurdish zone or form of federalism that gives the Kurds control over the minorities in the significant parts of Iraqi governorates where Kurds would then dominate areas that are not Kurdish. The attention given to sectarian cleansing sometimes leads Americans to ignore Kurdish efforts to take control of Arab, Turcoman, and other areas. This includes efforts to take control over Kirkuk, and expand Kurdish control over the broader ethnic fault line east of the Mosul area. Ethnic cleansing along the Kurdish zone is not close to being as violent as sectarian cleansing elsewhere in Iraq, but is scarcely "soft" or something the US should support.

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<sup>i</sup> The Pew poll can be found on the Pew website and is dated 7-24-2007:  
<http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=257>.