

October 20, 2000

"LEGISLATING HISTORY?" CONGRESS AND THE U.S.-TURKISH STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

In the final weeks of the legislative session, a draft resolution made the rounds on Capitol Hill with potentially explosive implications for U.S.-Turkish relations. House Resolution (H. Res.) 596, which sought to explicitly recognize the deaths of ethnic Armenians in the final days of the Ottoman Empire as "genocide," and called upon the president to do the same, was pulled from the House floor after an eleventh hour appeal by the president. While the resolution's last minute failure on October 19 staved off yet another crisis in a most precarious region at a critical juncture, some legislators are already pledging to reintroduce the resolution in the next Congress.

The effort to adopt H. Res. 596 set off a political firestorm in Ankara. Although the resolution was legally non-binding, Turkey's National Security Council announced a "plan of action" containing numerous retaliatory countermeasures: cancellation of arms contracts, the barring of American companies from participating in energy projects in Turkey, and even withdrawing permission for the use of Incirlik airbase to patrol Iraq's northern "no-fly zone." But efforts by the Armenian diaspora to redress an historically controversial injustice, as well as election-year gamesmanship by legislators, may still have a significant impact on the future of American foreign policy from the Balkans to the Caspian to the Persian Gulf. The incident is emblematic of the American failure to clearly define its overarching national priorities in the post Cold War world, allowing parochial interests to remain an ever-present "sword of Damocles" dangling over American strategic imperatives.

Political Gamesmanship

Commentators in the United States and Turkey rightly pointed to the timing of the resolution and its undeniable link to election-year politics. H. Res. 596's original incarnation, H. Res. 398, was introduced in November 1999 and languished in obscurity like several similar pieces of previously proposed legislation supported by Armenian-American lobbying organizations. Deliberations on H. Res. 398, the "United States Training on and Commemoration of the Armenian Genocide Resolution" in the final weeks before House members returned home for last-minute campaigning was custom made to appeal to Armenian-American communities, particularly in strategic electoral districts in California, New Jersey, and Michigan. H. Res. 398 enjoyed wide bipartisan support, including 144 co sponsors on both sides of the aisle as well as endorsements from both the House's majority and minority leadership - a testament of lobbying effectiveness on an issue deemed historically obscure to many House members, yet assured to pay significant electoral dividends.

John P. Feehery, spokesman for House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) told the *New York Times*, "If it weren't for Jim Rogan, this wouldn't be coming to the floor." Feehery confirmed speculation among most

observers that the resolution was placed on the agenda by the Republican House leadership solely to give a boost to James Rogan (R-Cal.). Rogan is facing a close race against Democratic State Senator Adam Schiff in California's 27th district - a district with one of the nation's largest per capita Armenian-American populations, representing eight percent of the electorate and the largest concentration of Armenians outside Armenia. Observers note that Armenian-Americans represent a crucial swing vote in Los Angeles suburbs of Glendale, Burbank and Pasadena, which both candidates have courted aggressively with Armenian-language ads, speeches in Armenian and appearances on local Armenian-language public access cable channels. Members of Southern California's 75,000-strong Armenian-American communities have taken notice and reportedly are registering to vote in record numbers.

While Armenian-Americans backed Rogan in past years, Schiff's active courting of the community's concerns makes this race among the closest and most expensive contests for control of the House. Rogan told reporters that he was "personally saddened" that H. Res. 598 had been pulled by the House leadership, but promised to reintroduce the resolution after tensions in the region subsided. For his part, Schiff has sponsored several pieces of similar legislation as a California state legislator, including a recently passed law allowing Armenian-Americans to file insurance claims in the state of California on behalf of losses suffered by their ancestors in the Ottoman Empire 85 years ago. While the setback may well work in Schiff's favor, another future House resolution may be in the offing regardless of the election's outcome.

From "Commemoration" to "Affirmation"

The deliberations on H. Res. 398 were closely watched by Ankara since September 14, the beginning of hearings on the resolution in the House International Relations subcommittee on International Operations and Human Rights. The resolution's sponsor, George Radonovich (R-Cal.), argued in the hearing that recognition of "the twentieth century's first genocide" in Ottoman Turkey would further efforts to prevent future atrocities. Other supporters of the resolution argued that in the case of genocide, a "moral imperative" transcended U.S. strategic interests to recognize the experience of Armenians during the final days of the Ottoman Empire from 1915 to 1923. Supporters of the resolution argued further that, in the long run, Turkey would actually benefit from coming to terms with this "dark chapter of its past."

Accusations of "genocide" are an understandably passionate issue for the progeny of both the alleged perpetrators and the victims eighty years on. The resolution generated renewed debate in the United States and abroad over the accusations and recriminations, the complexities and the lingering ambiguities of this chaotic period immediately before the founding of the Republic of Turkey. Historical controversies aside, critics of the resolution, such as Dan Burton (R-Ind.), held that that H. Res. 398 was at best too particularistic and should be extended to condemn similar historical tragedies around the globe. At worst, the resolution's detractors saw a transparent political ploy to curry election-year favor with the activists in the Armenian-American community. After several hours of debate, including a heated exchange between former Turkish ambassador Gunduz Aktan and the unambiguously pro-Armenian chairman of the subcommittee, Chris Smith (R-N.J.), H. Res. 398 passed a voice vote on September 21, moving on to full committee.

The ostensible purpose of H. Res. 398 was to ensure "appropriate training and materials to all Foreign Service officers, United States Department of State officials, and any other executive branch employee involved in responding to issues related to human rights, ethnic cleansing, and genocide." But Marc Grossman, former Ambassador to Turkey and current director general of the Foreign Service and Human Resources at the State Department, testified that the events of 1915-1923 were already covered in the department's relevant education programs, making the resolution in its current form unnecessary. In addition to the State Department's objections, H. Res. 398's emphasis on executive branch agencies also made it eligible for referral to a committee dealing with government reform, chaired by Burton, where it would almost certainly be shelved. Consequently, the resolution was amended by its supporters between markups, removing language about training and commemoration and focusing on the House's recognition

of the "Armenian Genocide," transforming H. Res. 398 into H. Res. 596, the "Affirmation of the United States Record on the Armenian Genocide Resolution."

Voting on H. Res. 596 by full committee was delayed until October 3, when it passed by a significant margin of 24-11, with two members abstaining. The Speaker of the House pledged that he would expedite its consideration on the House floor before the recess, and reportedly snubbed a delegation of Turkish parliamentarians dispatched to Washington at the last minute to argue against the resolution. H. Res. 596 emerged from the Rules Committee on October 11 and was placed on the calendar for consideration. After much speculation, the resolution was finally placed on the agenda in the early hours of October 19. Earlier legislative efforts condemning the deaths of Armenians under Ottoman rule were resisted by previous administrations regardless of party, due to the potential impact on U.S.-Turkish strategic relations. The Clinton administration, the first to issue a regular annual statement to Armenian-Americans commemorating the community's "day of remembrance" on April 24, has nevertheless been no less adamant. Both Secretary of State Madeline Albright and Secretary of Defense William Cohen testified in a joint letter to the House on the resolution's adverse potential for U.S.-Turkish relations, as well as its indirect impact on the future of U.S. policy towards the South Caucasus and Central Asia. In the final days before the resolution passed the International Relations Committee, President Clinton met with Hastert in an unsuccessful effort to enlist his assistance in blocking the resolution's consideration by the House floor, prompting his final appeal.

Hours before the resolution was scheduled for debate, Hastert received a letter from President Clinton, in which he was urged "in the strongest terms" not to bring H. Res. 596 to the floor. Clinton wrote "I am deeply concerned that consideration of H. Res. 596 at this time could have far-reaching negative consequences for the United States," citing U.S. policy in Iraq, the current tensions in the Middle East, the pursuit of peace in the Balkans, as well as efforts to assist in developing the Caucasus and Central Asia. "Consideration of the resolution at this sensitive time will not only negatively affect those interests, but could undermine efforts to encourage improved relations between Armenia and Turkey - the very goal the Resolution's sponsors seek to advance." Hastert then issued a press release reiterating his support for the resolution, but acceding to the president's request, based upon its potential contribution to further tensions in the regions and possible further threats to American lives. In the press release, Hastert said that "This is not an idle request...the President has made plain his very strong concerns about the timing of this resolution and its possible impact on our interests in the Middle East. We must take these concerns into consideration, especially given the latest developments in the Middle East.

"A Political Bombshell"

Recent weeks clearly illustrate how the resolution's blow to Turkish national pride would have threatened the U.S.-Turkish strategic partnership, crucial to securing Europe's southern flank during the Cold War, as well as Washington's future policies across the region. Turkish forces were among the first to be dispatched to Korea, and as a NATO ally, Ankara took a leadership role in hosting airfields, missiles, and monitoring stations along the Soviet frontier. Turkey was, until recently, third behind Israel and Egypt as a recipient of U.S. security assistance, and remains a leading purchaser of American armaments as it undertakes a \$50 billion military modernization program. Turkish troops played a role in the Gulf War, as well as in numerous peacekeeping operations throughout the past decade in Bosnia, Somalia, and Kosovo. Turkey has also been a constructive partner in Washington's plans to stabilize the Caucasus and Central Asia and to facilitate the export of Caspian region energy resources to Western markets. Perhaps most significantly to U.S. strategic interests, the Turkish airbase at Incirlik is central to Operation Northern Watch, patrolling Iraq's "no-fly" zone. One, many, and perhaps even all of these important roles may be threatened with the opening of a future "genocide resolution."

Every step of the way, Ankara has made its feelings known concerning the resolution, described by one Turkish commentator as "a political bombshell." Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer had conveyed

Ankara's sentiments to President Clinton in person concerning the resolution's progress in subcommittee during the United Nations Leaders Summit in September. Sezer followed up with a number of phone calls to the White House, where Clinton reportedly repeated his opposition and promised to continue lobbying against H. Res. 596. Robert Pearson, the newly arrived U.S. ambassador to Turkey, was also confronted with a stern exchange of views on the matter when he presented his credentials to President Sezer as well as when Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit received him. Turkish nationalists picketed the American embassy in protest of the resolution, placing a black wreath at the gates. Prime Minister Ecevit, Foreign Minister Ismail Cem, and other prominent Turkish officials repeatedly condemned the resolution. Turkish Chief of the General Staff Huseyin Kivrikoglu cancelled a previously scheduled visit to Washington in protest of the resolution's progression to the House floor.

Upon the announcement that H. Res. 596 had cleared the International Relations Committee, members of Turkey's coalition government announced that they would hold the Clinton administration, despite its demonstrated opposition, "personally responsible" for the resolution. Turkey's National Security Council then announced a "plan of action," featuring a possible review of the U.S.-Turkish Cooperation in Defense Agreement, the centerpiece of the Ankara-Washington's strategic partnership. In addition, the plan reportedly may cover the use of Incirlik by the multinational force involved in Northern Watch; the agreement is reauthorized by the Turkish parliament every six months and is scheduled for consideration at the end of December. Finally, Turkish legislators discussed the scrapping of all defense contracts awarded to American firms, as well as the disqualification of American companies from future tenders. Turkey also threatened to cancel the recently closed \$4.5 billion deal to buy 145 King Cobra attack helicopters manufactured by Bell Helicopter Textron.

American energy companies were also put on notice that they were equally vulnerable to political retaliation. Following a meeting with Ambassador Pearson on October 10, Energy Minister Cumhur Ersumer announced that H. Res. 596 might affect the future role of American companies in the Turkish energy sector. American companies lead the pack in Europe's fastest-growing energy market, investing approximately \$11 billion in several major projects in recent years and pursuing several other soon-to-be privatized generating plants. An opportunity for expansion of the U.S. presence in the Turkish energy market in 18 upcoming "Build-Operate-Transfer" (BOT) projects might also have been lost in the wake of the resolution's passage.

Diplomatic Fallout

Some observers remain skeptical that Turkey would have made good on its threats to cancel arms and energy deals with U.S. companies. However, the country's geographic centrality, seemingly inescapable in discussions of Turkey, clearly tipped the balance against the passage of H. Res. 596. But a successful resolution in the future may spur the parliaments of Europe to follow suit, adding yet another qualification for Turkey to satisfy before realizing its long-standing goal of membership in the European Union. Parallel to the consideration of the resolution in the House, similar resolutions have been proposed in the parliaments of France and Italy by members of the Armenian diaspora. Meanwhile, a campaign in Brussels to insert language relating to the "Armenian Genocide" into the Accession Partnership Agreement, the next step for Turkey's EU membership bid, was rejected by the European Parliament. While the resolution by itself is unlikely to ultimately derail Ankara's relationship with Europe, Turkey's cooperation in facilitating the reconciliation of the Cyprus conflict would, for example, almost certainly be affected.

Some observers remain skeptical that Turkey would have made good on its threats to cancel arms and energy deals with U.S. companies. However, the country's geographic centrality, seemingly inescapable in discussions of Turkey, clearly tipped the balance against the passage of H. Res. 596. But a successful resolution in the future may spur the parliaments of Europe to follow suit, adding yet another qualification for Turkey to satisfy before realizing its long-standing goal of membership in the European Union. Parallel to the consideration of the resolution in the House, similar resolutions have been proposed in the parliaments of France and Italy by members of the Armenian diaspora. Meanwhile, a campaign in Brussels

to insert language relating to the "Armenian Genocide" into the Accession Partnership Agreement, the next step for Turkey's EU membership bid, was rejected by the European Parliament. While the resolution by itself is unlikely to ultimately derail Ankara's relationship with Europe, Turkey's cooperation in facilitating the reconciliation of the Cyprus conflict would, for example, almost certainly be affected.

The most worrisome consequences of a chill in the U.S.-Turkish strategic relationship for Washington lie to the south. Operation Northern Watch has kept Saddam Hussein in check, a key foreign policy goal of the Clinton administration. While Turkish officials declared that recent moves to reestablish ties with Baghdad are completely unrelated to the deliberations in the proceedings in the House. But the reestablishment of diplomatic relations with Iraq has been widely debated among Turkish policymakers in recent years, not least because supporting U.S. sanctions have cost approximately \$30 billion in lost revenues to the Turkish economy over the past decade, according to Turkish sources.

On October 9, Turkey announced its intention to return an ambassador to Baghdad and dispatched several chartered planes with food, medicine, and other materials. Turkish authorities insist that the deliveries are not a retaliatory gesture, since the United Nations had previously approved the aid. But the timing of the flights, as Russia and France resume flights to Iraq, suggested that Washington's effort to isolate Saddam may become increasingly more difficult in the coming months if Turkey's cooperation could no longer be taken for granted. Turkey has also announced that it is considering allowing Iraq to increase its oil exports through Turkey, previously restricted to one million barrels per day through the Kerkuk-Yumurtalik pipeline as part of the UN's "oil for food" program. On October 15, Ersumer announced that "There is no obstacle to prevent the pipeline running at full capacity."

The abandonment of H. Res. 596 may be read as a victory by some, but electoral considerations in the House brought the resolution desperately close to rupturing one of Washington's most vital bilateral strategic partnerships. The narrowness of the defeat is not lost on the resolution's supporters either, ensuring that it is less a question of "if" but rather than "when" another such resolution may be introduced, taking U.S.-Turkish relations to the brink yet again. Recent weeks have thus illustrated that a post Cold War consensus on American foreign policy remains as elusive as it is desperately needed. Further afield, the incident also underlines the necessity of a new generation of impartial historians to return to the archives in order to reassess this chaotic period of Eastern Europe's history in order to answer numerous questions long overlooked by both sides concerning the events of 1915-1923. In the coming weeks, the effort may very well suffice in delivering votes and campaign contributions, two precious commodities to any politician. But from the viewpoint of American strategic interests, a successful resolution may very well prove to be the most devastating non-binding legislation ever devised.

David McKeeby
Research Assistant