

TURKEY UPDATE

*March 8, 2010**The Genocide Vote in Congress and US-Turkish Relations*

On March 4, 2010, the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee passed the “Affirmation of the United States Record on the Armenian Genocide” resolution by a vote of 23 to 22. The Turkish government showed its strong displeasure by immediately recalling Ambassador Namik Tan from Washington.

Prior to the vote, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan had cautioned against “a wrong step on March 4 and April 24” while Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu had called on the Obama Administration to “convince the House of Representatives not to vote in favor of the resolution.” Erdogan was predictably harsh in his comments after the vote. Saying that what had taken place was “a comedy” involving “Congressmen who cannot even find Armenia on the map” he warned that Turkey was “seriously concerned that this resolution approved by the committee despite all our warnings will harm Turkey-US ties and efforts to normalize Turkey-Armenia relations.” When asked if Turkey might withdraw its troops from Afghanistan or curtail US forces’ use of Incirlik airbase, Davutoglu responded by saying that the government would now be “reviewing all its options.” He also pointedly called for “a more effective policy from the administration.”

While it remains to be seen what additional steps the Turkish government may take, its strong initial reaction has certainly caught the attention of the administration. Soon after the vote an unnamed official said “congressional leaders understand the severe impact any further action would have on normalization between Turkey and Armenia.” This was followed by a statement from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton that “the Obama Administration strongly opposes the resolution that passed by only one vote in the House committee and will work very hard to make sure that it does not go to the House floor.” Her message was then underlined by Assistant Secretary of State Phillip J. Crowley who said “the leadership of Congress understands our position and they have taken this into account as they evaluate if any actions will be taken.”

While it now seems likely that the administration may prevent the resolution from making it to the floor of the House of Representatives, its failure to mount an effective campaign prior to the vote has clearly annoyed the Turkish government. The administration apparently made no effort in the weeks prior the committee meeting to dissuade House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Howard Berman from going ahead and Clinton’s telephone call to Berman expressing concern the evening before the meeting was apparently prompted by a call hours earlier from President Abdullah Gul to President Obama. Significantly, Clinton had refrained from expressing strong opposition to the impending House Foreign Affairs Committee vote in her responses to questions at two separate House hearings the previous week. While it is possible that the administration’s reticence was due to its understandable shift of emphasis from foreign affairs to the domestic agenda before important Congressional elections in November, it may also have reflected ambivalence on this issue within the White House.

Unlike his two immediate predecessors, Obama had repeatedly claimed as senator and presidential candidate that the events of 1915 were ‘genocide’ and that he would acknowledge them as such if elected president. It is noteworthy that Vice President Joe Biden and Secretary Clinton had similar positions when they were in the

Senate. However, in his presidential statement on April 24, 2009, Obama had refrained from using the word 'genocide' and had justified his action with specific reference to the need to focus on the ongoing normalization process between Turkey and Armenia. Obama's position was confirmed just a few hours before the vote by National Security Council spokesman Mike Hammer who said "The President's position on the events of 1915 is well known and his view of that history has not changed." In her own Congressional comments, Clinton had also argued that "the best way" to handle the 'genocide issue' was "for the Armenian and Turkish people themselves to address the facts of their past as part of their efforts to move forward."

Although the House Foreign Affairs Committee had passed similar resolutions in 2000 and 2007, neither had then been submitted to a vote on the House floor due to intense White House lobbying. In contrast to Obama, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush had not committed themselves on the genocide issue and had a much freer hand in opposing the resolutions by emphasizing the dangers of potential damage to US-Turkish relations. Having refrained from using national security considerations relating to Turkey's importance in US foreign policy and tied his avoidance of the word genocide in April 2009 to Turkish-Armenian normalization efforts, Obama now finds himself in a predicament as those efforts have effectively stalled.

In October 2009 Clinton had played a prominent role at a ceremony in Zurich where Turkey and Armenia finalized prolonged negotiations by signing protocols relating to the establishment of full diplomatic relations and the reopening of their common border. Erdogan made it clear soon after this event that the protocols would not be ratified by the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA) until Armenia began the process of withdrawal from occupied Azeri territory in and around Nagorno Karabakh. As there has been little tangible progress in Azeri-Armenian talks, the TGNA has not moved on the protocols. For its part, the Armenian government has continued to argue that the two issues are independent of each other, declared that the Armenian Parliament will not ratify the protocols until after Turkish ratification and recently sought and received parliamentary authorization to withdraw its signature from the protocols.

Even as the House Foreign Affairs Committee was preparing to vote, the administration continued to stress the importance of TGNA approval of the protocols. In his statement from the White House on March 4, Hammer urged "the rapid ratification of the protocols." He said that in his conversation with Gul, Obama had "expressed appreciation for his and Prime Minister Erdogan's efforts on normalization of relations between Turkey and Armenia." However, Hammer also noted that during her call to Berman, Clinton had expressed the view that congressional action "would harm the normalization of relations."

The Chairman of the TGNA Foreign Affairs Committee Murat Mercan and four other members of the Turkish parliamentary delegation who were in Washington to lobby against the resolution warned at a CSIS meeting on March 2 that passage of the resolution in the House Foreign Affairs Committee would indeed endanger the normalization efforts. Consequently, if the administration's lack of effective opposition to the resolution was designed to force Turkey to proceed to the ratification of the protocols, as some Turkish officials and parliamentarians have privately suggested, this may have been a serious miscalculation.

Obama had visited Turkey in April 2009, unusually early in his term in office and then hosted Erdogan at the White House in December. The reciprocal visits in the first year of Obama's presidency served to confirm the importance both his administration and the Erdogan-led Turkish government attached to their relationship. They also highlighted the degree of convergence between the policies of the two countries underscored by Obama's characterization of the relationship as a 'model partnership.'

Erdogan had demonstrated his own commitment to the relationship through his efforts to repair the damage after the crisis caused by the TGNA's refusal to allow American troops to attack Iraq from the north in March 2003. He clearly wishes to maintain strong links with the US. However, Turkish public opinion has been inflamed by the congressional vote, parliamentary elections are at most sixteen months away and Erdogan

cannot allow the opposition to take political advantage of what could be construed as weakness vis a vis the United States.

It is not yet clear what additional steps the Turkish government may take. However, it is worth noting that when the previous Turkish Ambassador returned to Washington after having been recalled in protest following the House Foreign Affairs Committee vote in 2007, he was bearing instructions relating to specific measures Turkey would take in the event of approval of the resolution on the House floor.

Turkey cooperates closely with the US in many areas of acute interest to Washington, including Afghanistan, where there are around 1,750 Turkish troops, and Iraq, where Ankara has been contributing to stabilization efforts as US troops begin to withdraw. Much of the military materiel bound for US forces in Afghanistan and Iraq passes through Incirlik air base in southern Turkey. Turkey also provides valuable intelligence in the ongoing US struggle against international terrorism. In addition, Ankara has acted as a conduit for messages between Washington and Teheran while endeavoring to help in the resolution of the impasse over Iran's nuclear program. At a broader level, it has been supportive of Obama's efforts to improve relations with the Middle East and the wider Islamic world.

On top of all his other domestic and international problems, Obama now needs to find a way to navigate between the competing and contradictory claims of the Armenian diaspora in the US and the Armenian government which want him to live up to his word on the genocide issue and the Turkish government which is calling on him to act in accordance with America's geopolitical interests. Attention now shifts from Congress to what Obama will choose to say on April 24.

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