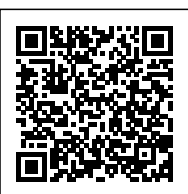


SHOULD THE UNITED STATES RECOGNIZE THE GENOCIDE OF ARMENIANS?

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✖ Matt Lewis, [Politics Daily](#), 3 March 2010

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Despite bipartisanship being so elusive in Washington these days, one hot button issue obliterates traditional partisan alignments on Capitol Hill: The contentious debate over how -- and whether -- the United States government should recognize the Turkish deportation and slaughter of Armenians during and immediately after the First World War.

At issue is House Resolution 232, which would officially recognize the killing of an estimated 1.5 million Armenians by the Ottomans as genocide. The resolution's supporters include a diverse and bipartisan group of more than one hundred members, including Reps. Adam Schiff (D-Calif.), Paul Ryan (R-Wisc.), Eric Cantor (R-Va.), Frank Pallone (D-N.J.) and Niki Tsongas (D-Mass.).

The vote is expected to take place Thursday at 10 a.m. in the House Foreign Affairs Committee (in 2007, a similar resolution passed that committee but failed on the floor due to heavy lobbying from the Bush administration and because Speaker Nancy Pelosi did not bring it to the floor for fear of losing the vote.)

Should the resolution pass the committee, its advocates would then push for an April floor vote, hoping to coincide with the vote with "Armenian Genocide Recognition Day" on April 24. But the resolution also has significant -- and bipartisan -- opposition. A letter urging congressional colleagues to reject it on the grounds it will complicate sensitive relations with a NATO ally was recently sent to the House Foreign Affairs Committee by Reps. Steve Cohen (D-Tenn.), Ed Whitfield (R-Ky.) and Kay Granger (R-Texas). "A vote on this resolution will do nothing to rectify the tragedies of the past," they wrote, "but it will most certainly have significant negative consequences on current and future relations with Turkey."

Efforts to pass the resolution probably got a boost this past Sunday when CBS' ["60 Minutes"](#) aired a

segment heavily sympathetic to the Armenian case. The "60 Minutes" segment also included an embarrassing interview with former Turkish Ambassador Nabi Sensoy, who, in references to "death marches," said: "Well, I don't think that it was anything comparable to Auschwitz. This was only deportation. And things happened on the road."

That is quite an understatement, and official U.S. concern that something truly terrible took place in Turkey go back to 1915 when Henry Morgenthau, the United States Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire sent a cable to the State Department describing "a campaign of race extermination." Additionally, we know that on May 24, 1915, the Allied Powers of England, France, and Russia issued a statement, accusing, for the first time ever, a recognized government of committing a "crime against humanity."

Yet, the question over whether or not the U.S. should pass a resolution now is complex.

First, there is a dispute over the legal definition of "genocide" -- a word that did not even exist until 1944. Today, the use of that word in diplomacy carries legal implications: namely, that it was the intent of the Ottoman Empire to impose racial, ethnic, or religious extermination. It is clear that the Ottoman Empire engaged in the mass killing and deportation of Christian Armenians. But Turks argue that focusing solely on the suffering of Armenians risks ignoring the millions of Muslims who also died during World War I -- some at the hands of Armenians. Moreover, they assert that Armenians were in open rebellion and were supporting Turkey's enemies during the First World War.

Today, it is a jailable offense to utter the word, "genocide" in Turkey, a fact that does little to reassure the world about Turkey's commitment to diverse opinions and political dissent. Because of their sensitivity to this issue, recent U.S. presidents have been careful not to use the word genocide to describe the atrocities. President Bill Clinton talked of the "deportations and massacres" of Armenians, and George W. Bush referred to the "forced exile and murder." Last year, I attended a cultural tour of Istanbul sponsored by the Turkish Cultural Foundation, and during our initial briefing, it was flippantly described by one of the speakers as "The 'g' word."

The Armenian diaspora in America is large, and so it is no surprise that the Armenian lobby in America is bigger and better organized than the Turkish lobby. In addition, there are many more Americans of Armenian than Turkish descent. Many of the most vocal members of Congress in support of the resolution hail from three states, California, New York, and Massachusetts, with large Armenian-American populations. To make up for their perceived disadvantage, Turkey has hired some of the most prominent K Street lobbying and public relations firms to make their case.

As unlikely as it may seem, they have a case to make: One bone of contention for the Turks is that the congressional resolution specifically says the genocide was "conceived and carried out by the Ottoman Empire from 1915-1923." This is an important sticking point because the new Turkish republic (founded by Ataturk) was officially proclaimed on October 29, 1923. Turks maintain that by

including the date 1923 in the resolution, their critics are covertly seeking to establish officially that atrocities weren't just committed by the defunct Ottoman Empire, but also by the modern Turkish Republic. They believe that passage of a resolution worded in this way would begin to lay the groundwork for Armenia to go to an international court and sue for reparations, possibly in the form of a land transfer.

There are other reasons to take a closer look at such a resolution. As America's only Muslim member of Congress, Keith Ellison (D-Minn.) said, "And you know, we have not acknowledged yet the genocide that was committed against the Native American tribes." This statement is not altogether true -- that pronoun "we" is obviously overbroad, but it's a fair point to wonder at the reaction among Americans if Turkey's parliament felt obliged to condemn Americans for "The Trail of Tears."

So why should America take a stand? For one thing, many scholars believe the Armenian genocide inspired Adolph Hitler, who noted in 1939 that the world seemed to have forgotten the fate of the Armenians. Silence, in other words, became complicity -- and helped set the stage for the Holocaust.

President Ronald Reagan sought such moral clarity. Just as he pointedly called the Soviet Union an "evil empire," Reagan did not mince words on this issue. Upon his death, the Armenian National Committee of America noted: "We will remember President Reagan as the last U.S. President to properly commemorate the Armenian genocide."

Those opposing the resolution cite *realpolitik* -- the diplomatic rationale -- to overlook past transgressions. They say that with two wars taking place in that part of the world, a secular democracy, a \$12 billion trading partner, and America's strongest NATO ally in the region should not be insulted in such a manner. Approximately 70 percent of supplies to our soldiers in Iraq go through Turkey, and most exit strategies for withdrawing troops from Iraq involve going through Turkey. Partly for this reason, when this issue came up in 2007, the Bush Administration --- along with eight former secretaries of state -- weighed in against the resolution.

The fate of this resolution may now hinge on President Obama. While campaigning for president, Obama promised to use the word "genocide," but in his first trip to Turkey, he did not utter the 'g' word. Still, he has been ambiguous regarding the upcoming vote, and the Turkish lobby is worried.

"If by its lack of forceful opposition to the resolution, the Obama Administration is trying to send a message to Turkey, it's very unclear what that message is," says David Saltzman, counsel to the Turkish Coalition of America. "The United States has invested heavily in the reconciliation process, so frankly, I'm confused why the administration hasn't come out against Resolution 232."

