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The PKK and the Armenian Genocide Resolution: U.S.-Turkish Relations at a Critical Juncture

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On October 21, Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) operatives carried out an attack from northern Iraq into Turkey, killing twelve Turkish soldiers. This incident followed the killing of more than thirty people in recent weeks, including an incident in which the PKK pulled a dozen civilians off a public bus and shot them. The Turkish public has responded to the attacks by calling for incursion into northern Iraq to eliminate PKK camps there.

Exacerbating these developments is the October 10 House Foreign Affairs Committee vote in favor of the Armenian Genocide Resolution (AGR), which recognizes the deportation of Ottoman Armenians during World War I as genocide. Regardless of its intent, the AGR could hold a number of negative consequences for U.S.-Turkish relations. In addition to diplomatic tensions, the committee's action may jeopardize U.S. efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, increase the likelihood of a Turkish incursion into northern Iraq, and increase the prospects of Turkish-Iranian rapprochement.

Reactions to the AGR

Many Turks strongly object to the depiction of the Armenian incident as genocide. Consequently, the U.S. resolution has led to a public backlash in Turkey -- where U.S. popularity is already at an all-time low due in large part to Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) attacks that continue to emanate from U.S.-controlled northern Iraq.

Turkey's leaders have shown similar discontent in the resolution's wake. On October 11, Ankara recalled its ambassador from Washington "for consultations," and on October 13, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan stated that U.S.-Turkish relations "could be cut off" if new tensions emerge. On October 14, Chief of Staff Gen. Yasar Buyukanit stated that U.S.-Turkish ties would "never again be the same" if the committee passed the resolution. And on October 17, Erdogan received authorization from the Turkish parliament to send troops to northern Iraq in response to increased PKK attacks.

The Turkish public has been following the AGR debate closely. Despite their overall negative response, most Turks have contained themselves somewhat because they understand the distinction between a committee vote and a full House vote. But if Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi succeeds in her expressed intent to bring the resolution before a full vote before Thanksgiving, a serious public backlash will likely unfold in Turkey, pushing the government toward even more concrete measures against Washington.

There are some signs, however, that the AGR might stall. Since the committee vote, seventeen House members have withdrawn their signatures from the resolution, bringing the number of cosponsors down to 211 -- just under majority.

Short-Term Problems in Afghanistan and Iraq?

The Bush administration's vociferous opposition to the AGR reflects the crucial nature of Turkey's collaboration with U.S. efforts in both Iraq and Afghanistan. On October 15, Defense Secretary Robert Gates responded to the committee vote by emphasizing this collaboration, stating for example that 70 percent of all cargo en route to Iraq and Afghanistan is sent through Turkey. Indeed, Ankara's blanket permission for U.S. logistical operations opens crucial land and air routes for military equipment and personnel. Consequently, Ankara can exercise leverage on several points in response to the AGR.

Afghanistan. The most immediate of these levers are in Afghanistan. Turkey has 1,150 troops in the country, as well as a reconstruction team responsible for building infrastructure in Wardak province. The Turkish military (in collaboration with France and Italy) is in charge of security in central Afghanistan, including Kabul. In addition, Turkey has led the International Security and Assistance Force twice in Afghanistan -- more so than any other NATO country -- making Turkish personnel a significantly experienced asset in the country. As a short-term response, Ankara might demonstrate its discomfort with the U.S.-Turkish alliance by reducing its commitments in Afghanistan.

Iraq. With regard to the Iraq war, the most important U.S. strategic assets in Turkey are the Incirlik base in the south (a major cargo and troop rotation hub) and the Habur crossing in the southeast (the only border gate between Turkey and Iraq). Currently, the United States has more than 1,100 troops at Incirlik, and the Habur gate is the chief land supply conduit from Europe and Turkey into Iraq, with more than 5,000 truck crossings per day.

The Turkish media has called for a reduction in U.S. capabilities at Incirlik and Habur should the AGR pass in the House. On October 11, the Turkish daily *Milliyet*, a pro-Western, mainstream newspaper, ran a front-page editorial calling for an end to Turkey's policy of providing the United States with a blank check in using Incirlik. It may not be possible to dismiss such rhetoric when America's standing in Turkey is at an all-time low -- a recent Pew Center poll showed that only 9 percent of Turks had favorable feelings toward the United States.

Given rising Turkish casualties as a result of PKK attacks, it is plausible that Turkey would have considered incursions into northern Iraq even regardless of the AGR's status. On Sunday, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called on the Turkish government to "wait for a few days" before taking action into northern Iraq, and Ankara agreed. If the full House passes the AGR, however, there would be increased public pressure on the government to act, making an Iraq incursion more likely than not.

Aligning with Iran?

The AGR might also push Turkey closer to Iran. The PKK issue alone has already moved the two countries closer together. Historically, they have been adversaries, particularly since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. Turkey's secular democracy contrasted with Iran's authoritarian theocracy, which subsequently supported PKK and Islamist terrorist action against Turkey. Since the Iraq war, however, Iran has recalibrated its Turkey policy. In an effort to break its own growing strategic isolation, Tehran has wooed Ankara on a number of fronts. Iran has not only ceased supporting the PKK, it has begun to actively combat the group. According to media reports, Iran frequently bombs PKK camps inside Iraq. Turkish sentiment toward Iran has warmed up significantly in response: according to a 2006 poll by the German Marshall Fund, 43 percent of Turks hold favorable feelings toward Iran, compared to 34 percent in 2004.

For the time being, long-term Turkish-Iranian alignment appears amorphous; for instance, Ankara has yet to finalize the countries' bilateral July 2007 memorandum of understanding on energy cooperation. The AGR could well solidify these and other nascent signs of alliance, however.

Conclusion

If passed, the AGR would make it difficult for Turkish policymakers to speak in favor of alignment with the

United States, especially on major foreign policy issues such as Iran and Iraq. Alternatively, a stalled AGR would be an amicable gesture that could strengthen America's supporters in Turkey and perhaps even dissuade Ankara from carrying out a politically complicated operation in Iraq.

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