

Watershed moment in US-Turkey relations

David L. Phillips¹

Executive summary

President Joe Biden recognized atrocities committed against Armenians as the Armenian Genocide in his statement on Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day (24 April 2021). The statement represents a watershed moment in US-Turkey relations. President Tayyip

Erdogan can address US and international concerns prior to the Biden-Erdogan summit on the margin of June's NATO meeting, or he can double down and intensify repression against Turkey's ethnic and religious minorities. Erdogan's course will define international relations prior to the centennial of the founding of the Turkish republic in 2023.

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Introduction

1.5 million Armenians were killed between 1915 and 1923 during the waning years of the Ottoman Empire. The overwhelming majority of historians refer to their deportation and murder as the “Armenian Genocide”. Despite this consensus, Turkey’s international standing has

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been reduced by Genocide denial, human rights abuses, and war mongering.

Recognition

US Presidential candidates have vowed to recognize the events between 1915 and 1923 as the “Armenian Genocide”. However, they declined to use the term upon becoming President. President Biden broke ranks with his predecessors who succumbed to Turkey’s threats, by issuing the following statement on Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day:

“Each year on this day, we remember the lives of all those who died in the Ottoman-era Armenian genocide and recommit ourselves to preventing such an atrocity from ever again occurring. Beginning on April 24, 1915, with the arrest of Armenian intellectuals and community leaders in Constantinople by Ottoman authorities, one and a half million Armenians were deported, massacred, or marched to their deaths in a campaign of extermination. We honor the victims of the Meds Yeghern so that the horrors of what happened are never lost to history. And we remember so that we remain ever-vigilant against the corrosive influence of hate in all its forms.

Of those who survived, most were forced to find new homes and new lives around the world, including in the United States. With strength and resilience, the Armenian people survived and rebuilt their community. Over the decades Armenian immigrants have enriched the United States in countless ways, but they have never forgotten the tragic history that brought so many of their ancestors to our shores. We honor their story. We see that pain. We affirm the history. We do this not to cast blame but to ensure that what happened is never repeated.



Today, as we mourn what was lost, let us also turn our eyes to the future—toward the world that we wish to build for our children. A world unstained by the daily evils of bigotry and intolerance, where human rights are respected, and where all people are able to pursue their lives in dignity and security. Let us renew our shared resolve to prevent future atrocities from occurring anywhere in the world. And let us pursue healing and reconciliation for all the people of the world.

The American people honor all those Armenians who perished in the genocide that began 106 years ago today.”

Biden’s recognition of the Armenian Genocide puts the executive and legislative branches on the same page. House Resolution 296, “affirming the United States record on the Armenian Genocide”, states that it is US policy to “(i) commemorate the Armenian Genocide, the killing of 1.5 million Armenians in the Ottoman Empire between 1915 and 1923; (ii) reject efforts to deny the Armenian Genocide; and (iii) encourage education and public understanding about the Armenian Genocide.” The resolution was adopted overwhelmingly by a vote of 405 to 11 on October 29, 2019.

Senate Resolution 150, adopted by unanimous consent on December 12, 2019, mirrors the House resolution. It confirms US policy “to commemorate the Armenian Genocide through official recognition and remembrance.” Furthermore, it commits to “reject[ing] efforts to enlist, engage, or otherwise associated the United States Government with denial of the Armenian Genocide”, and to encouraging education to that end.”

Turkey was able to defeat Congressional action and undermine Presidential proclamations on Genocide recognition in previous years. It has also deflected criticism of other serious human rights concerns by leveraging its NATO membership and strategic geography.

The administration of George W. Bush feared that if it recognized the Genocide, Turkey would restrict US air and land access to Iraq during the Iraq War. Despite walking on eggshells, the Turkish Grand National Assembly failed to have a quorum when it voted on March 1, 2003 to authorize the transit of US forces through Turkey to Iraq, thereby requiring them to use the southern route through Kuwait.

The Obama administration viewed Turkey as a key member of the International Coalition Against the Islamic State, which justified its decision against Genocide recognition. However, Turkey failed to act in good faith against Islamist extremism. On the contrary, Turkey actively sponsored Islamist jihadis giving them weapons, money and logistical support as they traversed the so-called jihadi highway from Sanliurfa to Raqqa. It is estimated that 40,000 foreign fighters from 80 countries travelled through Turkey to Syria.

Denial campaign and shifting relations

“K Street” lobbyists have profited from Turkey’s denial campaign. In 2020, the Government of Turkey spent over \$4 million on lobbying and public relations. The three biggest recipients of this money, who were paid \$3 million combined, were Greenberg Traurig LLP, Mercury Public Affairs, and Saltzman & Evinch. With pressure from Armenian-American advocacy groups, Greenberg Traurig and Mercury dropped their support for the lobbying effort.

Turkey’s advocacy engaged multiple partners. Circumventing the Foreign Agent Registration Act (FARA), additional gifts were made to think-tanks such as the Atlantic Council for advocacy activities on behalf of Turkey. The Atlantic Council took in \$1 million from Turkey’s Energy Ministry for conferences on regional energy issues. When the Ministry’s largess was scrutinized, the Atlantic Council identified new supporters in the private sector. The US Department of Justice is fully aware that these donors rely extensively on the Turkish Government for their support.



In the past, Turkey has relied on the so-called Israel lobby and arms industries to advocate its case. Turkish President Erdogan has, however, undermined these relations by labelling Israel's treatment of Palestinians as a "genocide" and calling Israel a "terrorist state". He withdrew ambassadors from Israel after the US moved its embassy to Jerusalem.

In 2017, Turkey also purchased the Russian S-400 mobile surface-to-air missile system for \$2.5 billion, in violation of NATO protocols. The first of the missile batteries was received in July 2019. Not only does this raise concerns about Turkey-Russia relations. It undermines the effectiveness of NATO air defense in the region.

US-Turkey relations are shifting from a confluence of factors.

Islamist jihadis, under Turkey's control, invaded North and East Syria beginning in 2016, killing hundreds of Kurdish fighters in the Syrian Defense Forces. Serving as the US's boots-on-the-ground, more than 11,000 Syrian Kurdish militias were killed and 23,000 wounded fighting ISIS at America's behest. Turkish forces have also cooperated with Tahrir al-Sham in Idlib, a group which is considered the "Syrian branch" of Al Qaeda.

Erdogan undermined support from the US evangelical community by jailing Pastor Andrew Brunson and sponsoring jihadists proxies who murdered Armenian, Chaldean and Assyrian Christians in Syria. He also reverted the Hagia Sophia, the ancient cathedral-turned-mosque-turned-museum, back to its status as a mosque, undermining its ecumenical character.

In September 2019, Turkey deployed jihadi gangs in the Hamza and Sultan Murad brigades from Syria to Artsakh (the Armenian term for Nagorno-Karabakh, a historic Armenian land in Azerbaijan). Along with Azerbaijani troops, they systematically committed war crimes, decapitating civilians, mutilating bodies, and driving hundreds of thousands of ethnic Armenians from their homes. In the past, these mercenaries have committed similar crimes against ethnic Kurds and Syrian civilians. Armenians were killed not by random acts of

violence. Crimes were coordinated by Turkey's National Intelligence Agency under Erdogan's authority. The events in Artsakh represent a second Armenian Genocide.

Though former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu heralded a policy of "zero problems with neighbors", Turkey today is at-odds with almost all of its neighbors. Turkish forces are deployed to Syria, Iraq, and Libya. Relations with Greece, Cyprus and Israel in the Eastern Mediterranean are a tinderbox. Turkish war ships enforce Turkey's natural gas claims, in violation of international maritime law. The dispute over energy claims brought Greece and Turkey to the brink of naval conflict and required EU mediation. Many EU member states are increasingly frustrated with Turkish antics. They also complain about Erdogan's efforts to extort funds from the EU in exchange for managing refugee flows from Turkey to Europe. The refugee crisis is a problem Turkey helped to create by supporting Sunni fighters in Syria's civil war.

Erdogan has doubled down after Biden's statement on Armenian Remembrance Day, ignoring opportunities for dialogue and reconciliation. He has threatened to deny US access to Incirlik Air Force Base and Kurecik Radar Base, both NATO facilities, in response to President Biden's use of the "G-word". Other diplomatic measures have also been threatened, including outreach by Turkey to Russia, Iran and China.

Perfect storm

Erdogan has created a perfect storm of problems through his denial of the Armenian Genocide, purchase of sophisticated weapons from Russia, and attacks on the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) whose leaders languish in Turkish prisons. Duly-elected mayors have been replaced by government-appointed local administrators, as part of a widening government crackdown on the HDP. And thousands of Kurds in the Kurdish Communities Union (KCK) have been jailed for demanding cultural and political rights, including democratic confederalism. Freedom House downgraded



Turkey from “partly free” to “not free” in response to its abuse of political and civil rights, as well as denial of Internet freedoms.

Erdogan seems impervious to pressure from foreign governments. However, he fears sanctions and their economic consequences that could undermine support for his Justice and Development Party (AKP). The Turkish Lira has collapsed from the AKP’s economic mismanagement. One USD purchased two Turkish Lira when the AKP came to power in 2002. Today, the dollar is worth 8.29 Turkish Lira. Turkey’s economic boom under the AKP was fueled by access to cheap credit. Businesses are defaulting as creditors call in their notes; Turkey’s foreign currency reserves have dwindled dramatically creating a macro-economic crisis.

Turkey can ill afford an economic war with the US and Europe. It is already sanctioned under the Countering American Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) for purchasing S-400 missiles from Russia. Working with Congress, the Biden administration could intensify CAATSA sanctions.

The US could also apply sanctions under the Global Magnitsky Act for Turkey’s human rights abuses and support for jihadis. The Global Magnitsky Act allows the US to sanction officials of foreign governments who have committed gross human rights violations. Handlers in Turkey’s intelligence agency and Defense Ministry could also be sanctioned under the act.

If Turkey continues on its current course, the US could label Turkey as a “state sponsor of terrorism”, which would require more mandatory sanctions. According to the [State Department](#), any country that the Secretary of State designated a state sponsor of terror will face restrictions on foreign assistance; bans on defense exports; controls over “dual use item” exports; and financial restrictions.

The EU is considering sanctions of its own. Recently, the EU approved sanctions on Turkish officials over the aforementioned natural gas dispute with Greece. European officials have been

waiting to see what the US does before finalizing its approach. This gives the Biden administration opportunity to take the lead on defining the scope of potential sanctions against Turkey.

Restoring relations

Presidents Biden and Erdogan will have a bilateral summit on the margin of the NATO meeting in June 2021. President Biden's affirmation of the Armenian Genocide will be a bitter pill for Turks to swallow in the short term, but it will lay the foundation for restoring relations over time. It will also boost progressive reformers in Turkey who disdain Erdogan and the damage he has done to Turkey's international standing. Genocide recognition is not a stand-alone event. It should be part of a comprehensive strategy marginalizing the AKP, and supporting reform.

