

Armenian debacle

By Tulin Daloglu
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House Speaker Nancy Pelosi says she believes that "the biggest ethical challenge facing our country is the war in Iraq." Therefore, she must believe that passing a resolution declaring the mass killings of Armenians at the end of World War I a genocide will restore America's moral authority. Rep. Tom Lantos, California Democrat, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said, "I feel that I have a tremendous opportunity as a survivor of the Holocaust to bring a moral dimension to our foreign policy." The resolution passed last week by a 27"21 vote.

However, while Mr. Lantos speaks so forcefully about the resolution now, he has opposed similar measures in the past, arguing that what happened to Armenians is not technically a genocide. In fact, he argued this right up until Turkey refused to give the United States a northern front to invade Iraq in 2003. According to congressional sources, Mrs. Pelosi urged Mr. Lantos to support the resolution, or else risk his chairmanship. In addition, Mr. Lantos was seriously troubled when the Turkish government invited the newly elected Hamas leadership of the Palestinian Authority to Ankara, and by what appears to be Turkey's strengthening relationship with Iran.

A delegation of Turkish Parliament members visiting Washington was disappointed by the vote. "What bothered me was that those [U.S. representatives] who supported the Turkish side, 21 of them said loud and clear that the events of 1915 amounted to genocide," said Gunduz Aktan, a former ambassador and member of the Turkish Parliament from the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). "Despite this, because of Turkey's strategic importance, because of the national interest of the U.S., they are voting no. This was unbearable." Turks share Mr. Aktan's opinion. But they should also know who lobbies on Turkey's behalf. Former House Minority leader Richard Gephardt, hired by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government to lobby for Turkey, actively worked in support of such resolutions in the past. When a last-minute intervention by President Bill Clinton stopped a similar resolution before a vote in 2000, Mr. Gephardt wrote to the then-House Speaker Dennis Hastert, Illinois Republican, to tell him that he was "committed to obtaining official U.S. government recognition of the Armenian genocide."

Although Egemen Bagis, one of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's chief foreign policy advisers, said that Turkey has done everything in its power to avert the resolution's passage, it also made many mistakes. Not only did the Turkish government hire Mr. Gephardt, but it also placed too much stock in the perception that Turkey's geographically strategic position would ensure such a measure's defeat.

Evidently, President Bush, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Defense Secretary Robert Gates did all they could to try to defeat the bill in committee. Now Turkey must

face this failure — it lost the propaganda war on this issue long ago. In fact, not only did the Turkish government fail, but Turkish Americans who did not take this issue as seriously as the Armenian Americans failed as well.

Mrs. Pelosi may think that a House resolution will finally close the issue. But Turks are convinced that it will begin a new chapter and spur reparations claims. U.S. officials advise Turkey to deal with the issue as plain historical fact. That's easily said. But Turks wonder what the connection is — and why the United States has done nothing to prevent the Kurdish separatist PKK from gaining strength in northern Iraq and increasing its attacks on Turkey. They are convinced that America wants to enforce the Treaty of Sevres which would allow Kurds and Armenians to lay claim to Turkish land.

Many in the United States believe the Kurds have a legitimate right to their own state. Recently the Senate passed a resolution calling the partition of Iraq into three self-governing regions for Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds. Turks are worried that such a plan will lead some of its Kurdish citizens to seek independence as well. However, Sevres did not promise Kurds an independent state; it promised "the formation of an autonomous region which would have the right to elect for complete independence one year after the formation of the autonomous area."

David McDowell, in "A Modern History of the Kurds, " explains that "[t]he terms were flawed" by the failure to demarcate Kurdistan's boundary with Armenia. This was foreseeably bound to outrage either the Kurds or the Armenians, as President Wilson's pro-Armenian proposed boundary accompanying the treaty clearly showed." Wilson set the Armenian borders to include Kurdish areas of Turkey, but he was unable to finalize them.

Turks look at their history and wonder why the president refuses to act against a Kurdish terrorist organization attacking them from northern Iraq, and why a Democratic Congress is considering an act that happened nearly 100 years ago. Ultimately, what everyone needs to do is move on — but the war in Iraq and the possibility of its breakup seem to haunt the present.

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