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## It's time to tell it like it is about Armenian genocide

Roxanne Makasdjian - Sunday, November 4, 2007

The Armenian genocide resolution pending in Congress (HR106) has prompted debate about whether it's the right time for the United States to officially recognize the systematic annihilation of the Armenian population in Turkey, perpetrated by the government of the Ottoman Empire in 1915. Against increasingly bold denials of history and unjustifiable intimidation by Turkey, now is the best time for our country to tell it like it is.

A wave of disinformation has been disseminated by the Turkish and U.S. administrations since the resolution passed the House Committee on Foreign Affairs on Oct. 10. Turkey's threats have included cutting off the use of our air base, thus restricting our military shipments, and intervening in northern Iraq, destabilizing the only relatively quiet part of that country. The rationale for those threats is deceptive, the resolution being a convenient excuse to threaten to disrupt U.S. military actions in Iraq to advance Turkey's own interests.



The fact is that we needn't become hostage to blackmail. In 2003, without an Armenian genocide resolution up for a vote, Turkey refused to allow us to use our base at Incirlik to invade Iraq. We carried out the invasion successfully anyway. The United States has numerous military bases in the area - in Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Jordan, Bulgaria, the United Arab Emirates and Afghanistan - from which we can operate.

The New York Times, Wall Street Journal and the Turkish Daily News have all quoted U.S. officials saying that if Turkey cut off our base or supply lines, it would not greatly affect our military operations. And, according to a recent article in Defense News, the Armenian genocide resolution wouldn't even "dent" U.S. arms sales to Turkey. Several years ago, when France passed a similar resolution, arms sales between France and Turkey were back to booming within months.

Turkey's strategic interests are much more dependent on good relations with the United States than vice versa. If we tolerate Turkey's blackmail, we actually weaken our position in the strategic relationship and embolden others in the region to blackmail us.

Turkey's threats against the Kurds in Iraq are also not new, nor a result of the pending resolution. Successive Turkish governments have had claims on the oil-rich, northern Iraqi region of Kirkuk and Mosul from as early as the 1930s. Turkish governments have also treated their 20 million Kurds worse than second-class citizens.

Anti-Americanism has reached new heights in Turkey not because of the Armenian genocide resolution, but because of opposition to the U.S. intervention in Iraq and the consequent formation of a Kurdish autonomous government controlling the oil revenue in northern Iraq. As Graham Fuller, former vice chairman of the CIA's National Intelligence Council, wrote recently, "Turkish-American relations have been deteriorating for years, and the root explanation is simple and harsh: Washington's policies are broadly and fundamentally incompatible with Turkish foreign policy interests in multiple arenas."

Despite all this, the United States has been enabling Turkey's denial of the genocide, damaging our reputation and giving a junior ally the upper hand in a relationship in which we should be leading. Last year, the U.S. government went as far as dismissing our ambassador to Armenia, John Evans, for discussing the Armenian genocide. President Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice have recently gone further, referring to the Armenian genocide as an open historical question needing more study.

This position contradicts the vast majority of historians and Holocaust and genocide studies that recognize this event as unambiguous genocide, as well as the abundant documentation in our own national archives, including the memoirs of the U.S. ambassador to Ottoman Turkey in 1915, Henry Morgenthau, who wrote of witnessing the "extermination of a whole race."

Turkey has even reached into our educational system by lobbying against inclusion of the Armenian genocide in our textbooks, and against local remembrances of the genocide, as was the case when Armenian Americans purchased San Francisco's Mount Davidson Cross in memory of their slain forefathers.

In Turkey today, discussion of the Armenian genocide is a crime carrying as many as 10 years in prison. Scores of writers, professors and community leaders are being prosecuted under this law, legitimizing the undemocratic, nationalist fervor of the Turkish masses. In this context, the government's call for a commission of Turkish and Armenian historians to study the "events of 1915" is simply a way to bury the truth.

Contrary to opponents' claims, House Resolution 106 does not condemn present-day Turkey for the crimes of its predecessor, nor does it demand that Turkey recognize the genocide. It simply reaffirms the historical record, a necessary affirmation when faced with massive denial. Congress has passed recent resolutions reaffirming the truth of the Holocaust as well as the genocides in Cambodia, Ukraine, Bosnia and Darfur.

Most recently, we watched Bush and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi give the Congressional Gold Medal to the Dalai Lama, despite China's warnings that such action would be detrimental to U.S.-China relations. Giving in to similar warnings from Turkey would highlight the hypocrisy in that action and signal to the world that we have a clear double standard when it comes to human rights. The longer the United States helps Turkey's denial, the longer the denial will continue, and the longer we'll be hostage to it. Instead, we should help steer Turkey toward democracy, for its own sake - and ours.

**Roxanne Makasdjian is chair of the Bay Area Armenian National Committee.**