

Wrong resolution on Turkish killings

By Kenneth Ballen

Rarely does Congress exclusively hold the key to America's foreign relations with a critical ally. But now, with Turkey, the only Muslim country allied with the United States in NATO, the future of Turkish-American relations is solely in the hands of Congress.

Speaker Nancy Pelosi has pledged to bring before the House next month a congressional resolution formally recognizing as organized genocide the mass killings of Armenians from 1915 to 1923 in Turkey's predecessor state of the Ottoman Empire. Ms. Pelosi strongly supports the resolution, and it now appears likely to be approved.

According to a new nationwide public opinion survey of Turkey recently conducted by Terror Free Tomorrow, the nonprofit organization I lead, congressional passage of this resolution would set back the cause it purports to achieve, namely Turkey's recognition of its past and reconciliation with Armenia today.

The courageous Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink, who was assassinated for trying to promote reconciliation just two weeks before our survey, believed that the key for Armenians was Turkish public opinion, saying: "The winning of the empathy and compassion of the Turkish population is far more important than the adoption of Armenian resolutions in hundreds of parliaments elsewhere."

Our survey proves Mr. Dink right. Rather than win Turkish empathy, the forthcoming resolution from Congress would harden public attitudes in Turkey - and likely in Armenia as well.

Indeed, the feelings of the Turkish people on this issue run deep - 78 percent of Turks oppose the resolution, and three-quarters feel that passage will worsen their opinion of the United States.

In our survey of 1,021 Turks 18 and older, only one-fifth of them expressed a favorable opinion of the U.S. But even among those Turks who now have a favorable opinion toward America, four-fifths responded that their opinion would deteriorate if the resolution were to pass.

These attitudes could lead anti-American feelings in Turkey to the abyss. Seventy-nine percent of Turks favor strong action by the Turkish government if an Armenian resolution passes, including suspension of diplomatic relations with the U.S. and boycotting American products.

Critically, Turks surveyed feel so powerfully about this issue that should the resolution pass, 83 percent would oppose Turkey assisting the U.S. in neighboring Iraq.

The reasons for Turkish opinion have less to do with the issue of recognizing the mass killings of Armenians as genocide than with outside American political judgment of Turkish history. In fact, three-quarters of all Turks would accept scholarship by independent historians on what occurred between Turks and Armenians.

The problem for most Turks is that they do not consider the U.S. Congress a neutral judge. Instead, Turks largely see the resolution as driven by anti-Muslim feelings and American domestic politics.

At this moment, when opinion of the U.S. is at a nadir throughout the Muslim world, Congress is poised to further alienate one of our few democratic Muslim allies.

If the goal of the congressional resolution is to promote reconciliation between Turkey and Armenia today, its proponents should be aware that 73 percent of Turks think the resolution will have the opposite effect.

Yes, the genocide of innocent Armenian civilians in the waning days of the Ottoman Empire must be universally acknowledged - even if condemning the mass killings as genocide provokes the ire of most Turks. That fact must never be the issue.

But how can Congress best help our ally, Turkey, to acknowledge the wrongs of its past while advancing reconciliation with Armenia in the present?

The task should be the one Hrant Dink gave his life for: to help promote a neutral, independent and credible mechanism that can further reconciliation while recognizing past wrongs. That neutral forum should include not only expert historians, legal scholars and political leaders from Turkey and Armenia but also similar representatives from other countries that have successfully confronted their histories, such as Germany and South Africa.

The momentous issue of genocide demands no less than a response designed to lead to true recognition and reconciliation.

Kenneth Ballen prosecuted international terrorists and served as counsel to the House Iran-Contra Committee. He is president of Terror Free Tomorrow, a nonprofit organization in Washington. His e-mail is kballen@terrorfreetomorrow.org.

The New York Times

October 15, 2007

In a front page story, the *Times* cites Terror Free Tomorrow's survey of Turkey:

“In a random sample public opinion survey of more than 1,000 adults conducted throughout Turkey in person early this year by Terror Free Tomorrow, a Washington-based nonprofit group, 73 percent of Turks surveyed said that if the House passed the resolution, their opinion of the United States would decline, while 83 percent said that they would oppose Turkey assisting the United States in Iraq. The poll had a margin of sampling error of plus or minus three percentage points.”

The Washington Post

October 10, 2007

In a front page analysis, the *Post* cites Terror Free Tomorrow's survey of Turkey:

“A recent poll by the nonpartisan group Terror Free Tomorrow found that 83 percent of Turks would oppose assisting the United States on Iraq if the Armenia resolution passed.”



October 11, 2007

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