



## POINT OF VIEW

# Will Israel follow US Congress in Recognizing the Armenian Genocide?

Zaki Shalom and Jacob Aaron Collier \*

***The US House of Representatives and US Senate have both recently adopted resolutions formally recognizing the Armenian Genocide, expressing that it is the sense of both chambers of Congress that the policy of the United States is to “commemorate the Armenian Genocide through official recognition and remembrance.”<sup>1</sup> The resolutions also set the historical precedent for such a move, stating: “Whereas the United States has a proud history of recognizing and condemning the Armenian Genocide, the killing of an estimated 1,500,000 Armenians by the Ottoman Empire from 1915 to 1923, and providing relief to the survivors of the campaign of genocide against Armenians, Greeks, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Syriacs, Arameans, Maronites, and other Christians.”<sup>2</sup>***

House Resolution 296 passed 405-11 (with 3 voting present) on October 29th, 2019, and Senate Resolution 150 passed unanimously on December 12th, 2019. These are virtually identical, non-binding resolutions declaring that it is now the policy of the United States to: “commemorate the Armenian Genocide through official recognition and remembrance; to reject efforts to enlist, engage, or otherwise associate the United States Government with denial of the Armenian Genocide or any other genocide; and to encourage education and public understanding of the facts of the Armenian Genocide, including the role of the United States in humanitarian relief efforts, and the relevance of the Armenian Genocide to modern-day crimes against humanity.”<sup>3</sup>

\* *Professor Zaki Shalom* is a member of the research staff at Ashkelon Academic College and the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) in Tel Aviv, Israel.

*Jacob Aaron Collier* is a research intern at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) in Tel Aviv, Israel, and a MA candidate in security and diplomacy studies at Tel Aviv University. He holds a BA in political science and global security studies from Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs.

The resolutions additionally cite the following as examples of American recognition of the Armenian Genocide and the affirmation that the prevention of such atrocities is in the national interest of the United States: A written statement of the United States Government to the International Court of Justice regarding the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide on May 28, 1951; Proclamation No. 4838 issued by President Ronald Reagan on April 22, 1981; House Joint Resolution 148, 94th Congress, agreed to April 8, 1975; House Joint Resolution 247, 98th Congress, agreed to September 10, 1984; and the Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act of 2018 (Public Law 115–441).<sup>4</sup>

The actions of both the US House and Senate have added their share to the already tense relations between the United States and Turkey. The controversies between these states, both members of NATO, has the potential to affect numerous aspects of US-Turkey Relations, especially regarding Turkey's strategic orientation vis-à-vis the West, Russia, and other actors. In terms of defense cooperation, a Congressional Research Service (CRS) report found that these resolutions could potentially push Turkish procurement decisions on air defense and aircraft towards Russia and could also harm Turkish willingness to host American and NATO troops and equipment.<sup>5</sup>

The same report also found that this resolution might also affect Turkish policies and sentiments regarding its traditionally tense relations with Armenia and the actions of its forces in Northern Syria against Kurdish or Christian populations.<sup>6</sup> There is also the issue of domestic treatment of minorities, including Armenians, other Christians, and Jews inside of Turkey, and the question of reparation claims by the individuals and groups affected by the events of 1915-1923.<sup>7</sup>

According to CRS, 49 out of 50 US states currently recognize the Armenian Genocide, and from 1984-2014, 15 resolutions using the word "genocide" in relation to the events affecting Armenians in the Ottoman Empire from 1915 to 1923 have been proposed in the House of Representatives and the Senate.<sup>8</sup> More recently, US President Donald Trump remarked on April 24th, 2019, that this event was, "one of the worst mass atrocities of the 20th century," and that, "one and a half million Armenians were deported, massacred, or marched to their deaths."<sup>9</sup>

However, President Trump did not back the Congressional recognition of the Armenian Genocide despite his April 2019 remarks. Furthermore, it has been reported that the US State Department has not changed its policy towards the issue.<sup>10</sup> This, we believe derives from the Trump Administration's efforts to mend some of the strains with Turkey as it looks for partners to counter growing Iranian influence in the Middle East.

When addressing the resolutions passed in Congress, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan remarked, "We should oppose [the US] by reciprocating such decisions in parliament. And that is what we will do. Erdogan continued, "Can we speak about America without mentioning [Native Americans]? It is a shameful moment in US history."<sup>11</sup> Erdogan has also threatened to shut down the American air force base in Incirlik, stating: "If it is necessary for us to take such a step, of course we have the authority ... If this is necessary, together with our delegations, we will close down Incirlik if necessary."<sup>12</sup> It is unlikely however, that Turkey will follow through with such a drastic measure at this point in time, especially as the Trump Administration attempts to walk back the Congressional resolutions.

Over the years, such issues have also generated much discussion and debate inside of Israel. As Turkish-Israeli political and diplomatic relations spiral to new lows, the question of recognizing the genocide of the Armenian people keeps reappearing in the Israeli public debate. On July 7, 2011, the Israeli government notably decided to reject a resolution to commemorate in Israel the genocide of the Armenian people.<sup>13</sup> However, on September 24, 2019, Prime Minister Netanyahu stated that Erdogan has no right to criticize Israel regarding its military operations in Gaza as he simultaneously slaughters the Kurdish people and denies the holocaust of the Armenian people.<sup>14</sup>

Still, Israel has remained determined in avoiding formal recognition of the Armenian Genocide, notably because it is well aware of the crucial and powerful role which Turkey plays in the region and in the greater international community. Furthermore, Turkey is a member of NATO, and has close strategic

relations with the United States, as the Americans maintain a strategic airbase in Turkey. Turkey also plays a very important role in Europe, in that it has the ability to stop, or at least dramatically decrease the scope of migration from the Middle East to Europe. Turkey has leveraged this ability when bargaining with the European states. Lastly, Turkey is a strong economic power and OECD member<sup>15</sup> with the world's 19th largest nominal gross domestic product (GDP) and 13th largest gross domestic product based on purchasing power parity (GDP by PPP) according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF).<sup>16</sup>

This question of whether or not to recognize the Armenian Genocide has taken on yet another dimension as Israel moves towards closer strategic and economic relations with Greece and Cyprus. Notably, Israel, Greece, and Cyprus have recently signed the "EastMed" agreement for a massive pipeline capable of shipping 12 billion cubic meters of natural gas from the eastern Mediterranean to Europe per year.<sup>17</sup> Aside from the economic benefits, Israeli, Greek, and Cypriot leaders generally agree on the geostrategic importance of the aforementioned deal and that it will help contribute to regional peace. The Turkish government has taken a hostile stance to this project, as it envisions its own joint energy exploration with Libya in the eastern Mediterranean, while also insisting that the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (which is only recognized by Turkey) has the right to explore the waters around the entire island, infringing upon the territorial waters of the Republic of Cyprus. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has gone on record stating, "No matter who is involved, no plan in the region that excludes Turkey has any chance of success."<sup>18</sup>

In recent years, tensions between Israel and Turkey have grown sharply. In particular, Erdogan has undertaken measures to greatly enhance the relationship between Turkey and Hamas, with high ranking Hamas leaders maintaining offices in Turkey. Nevertheless, the economic relationship between the two countries remains strong. In 2017, Turkey and Israel conducted \$4.3 billion worth of mutual trade; \$2.9 billion of which was Turkish exports to Israel and \$1.4 billion being Israeli exports to Turkey.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, as of 2019, Turkey is Israel's 9th largest import partner.<sup>20</sup> These are all important considerations for Israel as it aims to maintain current economic ties while also establishing new economic and energy-based cooperation and projects in the region moving into the decade ahead.

Likewise, Israel's key relationship with Azerbaijan<sup>21</sup> also needs to be taken into consideration. Azerbaijan maintains historically close relations with Turkey and also denies the historicity of the Armenian Genocide. Furthermore, Azerbaijan and Armenia have long been engaged in a bloody territorial dispute regarding Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, Azerbaijan is one of the Muslim countries with which Israel enjoys its closest relations, and it is estimated that 40% of Israeli oil imports come from Azerbaijan or by way of Azerbaijan via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (TBC) pipeline.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, Azerbaijan remains a key market for Israeli arms exports, with transactions between 2012 and 2015 believed to amount to \$4 billion.<sup>24</sup> There is also a significant flow of tourists between the two nations. Perhaps most notably, Israel and Azerbaijan share common interests in combatting terrorism and countering Iran,<sup>25</sup> and have even "embraced cooperation" in the fields of counterterrorism and border security.<sup>26</sup>

In our view, and for the foreseeable future, Israel will not likely undertake a decision to formally recognize the Armenian Genocide knowing well that such a decision might lead its relationship with Turkey to a complete rupture. From an economic standpoint, this could potentially cost Israel a crucial trading partner while also risking the disruption of its energy-based initiatives in the region. Moreover, formal recognition of the Armenian Genocide could put Israel's relationship with Azerbaijan in a tough place. Given Azerbaijan's longstanding conflict with Armenia and its expressed denial of the Armenian Genocide, Israeli recognition could very well sour Israeli-Azerbaijani relations. Furthermore, Turkey holds significant leverage over their Turkic cousins, and could attempt to pressure Azerbaijan to cool its relations with Israel, something the Turkish government previously tried after the Mavi Marmara incident in 2010.<sup>27</sup>

Additionally, Israel appears to be concerned that the recognition of the Armenian Genocide will lead world public opinion to identify it with the Holocaust of the Jewish people. For years, Israel main-

tained the position that the Holocaust is a unique phenomenon in world history that cannot be compared with any other genocide event that took place in the world. Finally, Israel must undertake the consideration that a recognition of the Armenian Genocide could lead other states to recognize the Palestinian Nakba as a sort of Holocaust, which would certainly be highly harmful to Israel's image and national interests.

Still, for many Israelis, and indeed many Jews around the world, recognizing the Armenian Genocide is a matter of moral principle. Haunted by the collective memory of being a small minority subjected to systematic, state-sponsored murder, many Jews and Israelis alike sympathize with the plight that Armenians and other Christians faced during the final years of the Ottoman Empire. As Gregory Pappas from *The Pappas Post* writes, "Similarities between actions in Nazi Germany and Ottoman Turkey are striking, including facilities that were built, methods used to transport victims— even methods used to murder masses of people."<sup>28</sup>

However, others argue that from the standpoint of "realpolitik," formal recognition simply does not serve the national interests of the State of Israel at this time. The resolutions passed in both the American House and Senate recognizing the Armenian Genocide may very well encourage those who support recognition here in Israel, but we assess that given the potential costs, Israel, for the time being, will refrain from taking such an action.

# REFERENCES

All links accessed on February 6, 2020

1. House Resolution 296 <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-resolution/296/text?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%22armenian+genocide%22%7D&r=3&s=1>; Senate Resolution 150 <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-resolution/150/text>
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas, "Armenian Genocide' Issue Background and Pending House and Senate Resolutions (H.Res.296 and S.Res.250), Congressional Research Service, October 28, 2019, p. 3-4 <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/armenian.pdf>
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Clark Mindock, "Trump refuses to back recognition of Armenian genocide after Erdogan threat," The Independent, December 18, 2019 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-armenian-remembrance-day-2019/>
10. Laura Kelly, "Trump administration rejects Senate resolution recognizing Armenian genocide," The Hill, December 17, 2019 <https://thehill.com/regulation/international/474869-trump-administration-rejects-senate-resolution-recognizing-armenian>
11. Vincent Wood, "Erdogan threatens to recognize killings of Native Americans as genocide in response to Armenia resolution," The Independent, December 18, 2019 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/erdogan-trump-turkey-us-armenian-genocide-native-americans-a9249101.html>
12. Jonathan Spicer and Pravin Char, "Turkey could close Incirlik air base in face of U.S. threats – Erdogan," Reuters, December 15, 2019 <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-turkey-usa-sanctions-incirlik/turkey-could-close-incirlik-air-base-in-face-of-u-s-threats-erdogan-idUKKBN1YJOLN>
13. Israeli Knesset, Debate on the Genocide of the Armenian People, June 19, 2011 [https://www.gov.il/he/Departments/policies/2011\\_des3426](https://www.gov.il/he/Departments/policies/2011_des3426)
14. Benjamin Netanyahu, Remarks, September 24, 2019, [https://www.gov.il/he/Departments/news/spoke\\_turkey240919](https://www.gov.il/he/Departments/news/spoke_turkey240919)
15. OECD, Turkey <https://www.oecd.org/turkey/>
16. IMF, Turkey <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2019/02/weodata/weorept.aspx?pr.x=54&pr.y=7&sy=2017&ey=2021&scsm=1&ssd=1&sort=country&ds=.&br=1&c=186&s=NGDPD%2CPPPDPD%2CNGDPDPC%2CPPPDP%2CPCPIPC&grp=0&a=>
17. The Times of Israel, "Israel inks mega gas pipeline deal with Greece, Cyprus," The Times of Israel, January 2, 2020 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-inks-mega-gas-pipeline-deal-with-greece-cyprus/>
18. Burak Bir, "No plan in region can succeed without Turkey: VP Oktay," Anadolu Agency, January 1, 2020 <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/no-plan-in-region-can-succeed-without-turkey-vp-oktay/1689337>
19. Gallia Lindenstrauss, "Old and New Dynamics: What has Changed in Turkey-Israel Relations?" INSS Insight, No. 1061, May 24, 2018 <https://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/No.-1061.pdf>

20. CIA World Factbook <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/403.html#IS>
21. Gallia Lindenstrauss, "Israel-Azerbaijan: Despite the Constraints, a Special Relationship," INSS Strategic Assessment, Volume 17, No. 4, January 4, 2015 [https://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/systemfiles/adkan17\\_4ENG\\_7\\_Lindenstrauss.pdf](https://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/systemfiles/adkan17_4ENG_7_Lindenstrauss.pdf)
22. Council on Foreign Relations, Global Conflict Tracker <https://www.cfr.org/interactive/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/nagorno-karabakh-conflict>
23. Gallia Lindenstrauss, "Israel-Azerbaijan: Despite the Constraints, a Special Relationship," op. cit.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Alexander Murinson, "The Ties Between Israel and Azerbaijan," The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 110, October 2014 <https://besacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/MSPS110-web.pdf>
27. Gallia Lindenstrauss, "Israel-Azerbaijan: Despite the Constraints, a Special Relationship," op. cit.
28. Gregory Pappas, "Nazis, Turks Connected in Their Respective Holocausts," Pappas Post, June 1, 2015 <https://www.pappaspost.com/nazis-turks-connected-in-their-respective-holocausts/>