

MEMORANDUM

October 28, 2019

Subject: “Armenian Genocide” Issue Background and Pending House and Senate Resolutions (H.Res. 296 and S.Res. 150)

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This memorandum was prepared to enable distribution to more than one congressional office.

This memorandum provides information and analysis on the “Armenian Genocide” issue,¹ stated briefly; past congressional and state, presidential, and international actions on the issue; non-binding resolutions pending in the House and Senate (H.Res. 296 and S.Res. 150) on the issue; and possible effects from passing a resolution, including on U.S.-Turkey relations. H.Res. 296 may come to a vote in the House during the week of October 28.² Much of the information in this memorandum comes directly from CRS Report R41368, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas. For context on current U.S.-Turkey relations, see CRS Report R44000, *Turkey: Background, U.S. Relations, and Sanctions In Brief*, by Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas.

From 1915 to 1923, hundreds of thousands of Armenians died as a result of actions of the Ottoman Empire (Turkey’s predecessor state). U.S. and international characterizations of these events influence Turkey’s domestic and foreign policy, given strong Turkish objections to describing the events as genocide,³ and are in turn influenced by developments in Turkey-Armenia relations. Turkey and Armenia initially agreed in 2009 on a set of joint protocols to normalize relations, but the process stalled shortly thereafter and there has been little or no momentum toward restarting it.⁴

Past Congressional and State, Presidential, and International Actions

Congress has considered how to characterize the events of 1915-1923 on a number of occasions. In 1975 (H.J.Res. 148) and 1984 (H.J.Res. 247), the House passed proposed joint resolutions that referred to “victims of genocide” of Armenian ancestry from 1915 and 1915-1923, respectively.⁵ Neither proposed

¹ CRS takes no position on whether the word “genocide” accurately describes the events in question.

² Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, Floor Schedule Update for the Week of October 28, 2019; Zack Budryk, “Long-delayed resolution condemning Armenian genocide may finally reach House floor,” thehill.com, October 24, 2019.

³ Lindsay Wise, “House to Vote on Resolution to Mark Armenian Genocide,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 26, 2019.

⁴ Another source of tension between Turkey and Armenia, beyond the 1915-1923 events, is the dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan (which is closely linked with Turkey through ethnolinguistic ties) over the Armenian-occupied region of Nagorno-Karabakh within Azerbaijan’s internationally recognized borders.

⁵ Unlike most proposed resolutions on the matter in recent years, neither H.J.Res. 148 nor H.J.Res. 247 explicitly identified the

joint resolution came to a vote in the Senate. A number of other proposed resolutions characterizing these World War I-era events as genocide have been reported by various congressional committees (see **Table 1** for a list). Additionally, 49 U.S. states have recognized the events as genocide.⁶

All U.S. Presidents since Jimmy Carter have made public statements memorializing the events, with President Ronald Reagan referring to a “genocide of the Armenians” in a Holocaust Days of Remembrance proclamation in 1981.⁷ In an April 2019 statement, the third of his presidency, President Trump (echoing statements made by President Barack Obama) said that the events were “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.”⁸

In addition to past statements or actions by U.S. policymakers, the website of the Armenian National Institute, a U.S.-based organization, asserts that at least 28 other countries (not counting the United States or Armenia) have characterized the events as genocide in some way, including 16 of the 28 EU member states.⁹

Table 1. Congressional Committee Reports of Resolutions Using the Word “Genocide” in Relation to Events Affecting Armenians in the Ottoman Empire from 1915 to 1923

Date Reported or of Vote for Report	Proposed Resolution(s)	Committee
April 5, 1984	S.J.Res. 87	Senate Judiciary
September 28, 1984	S.Res. 241	Senate Foreign Relations
July 9, 1985	H.J.Res. 192	House Post Office and Civil Service
July 23, 1987	H.J.Res. 132	House Post Office and Civil Service
August 3, 1987	H.Res. 238	House Rules
October 18, 1989	S.J.Res. 212	Senate Judiciary
October 11, 2000	H.Res. 596 and H.Res. 625	House Rules
May 22, 2003	H.Res. 193	House Judiciary

Ottoman Empire or its authorities as perpetrators of the purported genocide. H.J.Res. 247 stated that “one and one-half million people of Armenian ancestry” were “the victims of the genocide perpetrated in Turkey.”

⁶ According to the Armenian National Committee of America, as of March 2019, Mississippi is the only U.S. state that has not.

⁷ President Ronald Reagan, Proclamation 4838, Days of Remembrance of Victims of the Holocaust, April 22, 1981, available at <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/42281c>. Additionally, in a May 1951 written statement to the International Court of Justice, the Truman Administration cited “Turkish massacres of Armenians” as one of three “outstanding examples of the crime of genocide” (along with Roman persecution of Christians and Nazi extermination of Jews and Poles). International Court of Justice, *Reservations on the Convention of the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide: Advisory Opinion of May 28, 1951: Pleadings, Arguments, Documents*, p. 25.

⁸ See, e.g., White House, Statement by the President on Armenian Remembrance Day, April 24, 2019. Beginning with President Obama in 2009, annual White House statements (including those from President Trump) have continuously referenced the “Medz Yeghern,” an Armenian phrase that translates roughly to “great crime.” Vartan Matiossian, “The ‘Exact Translation’: How ‘Medz Yeghern’ Means Genocide,” *Armenian Weekly*, May 15, 2013.

⁹ The EU states listed as having recognized a genocide are Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, and Sweden. The European Parliament has also referred to the deaths as genocide. The non-EU states are Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Lebanon, Paraguay, Russia, Switzerland, Vatican City, Venezuela, and Uruguay. In April 2015, the Republic of Cyprus’s ethnic Greek parliament passed a resolution making it a crime to deny that the events constituted genocide. In 2007, Switzerland criminally fined an ethnic Turkish politician for denying that the events constituted genocide, and in 2012 France passed a law making it a crime to deny that the events constituted genocide—though the law was subsequently invalidated by the French Constitutional Council. Long-standing Turkish law criminalizes characterization of the events as genocide.

Date Reported or of Vote for Report	Proposed Resolution(s)	Committee
September 15, 2005	H.Res. 316 and H.Con.Res. 195	House International Relations
March 29, 2007	S.Res. 65	Senate Foreign Relations
October 10, 2007	H.Res. 106	House Foreign Affairs
March 4, 2010	H.Res. 252	House Foreign Affairs
April 10, 2014	S.Res. 410	Senate Foreign Relations

H.Res. 296, S.Res. 150, and Possible Effects

H.Res. 296 and S.Res. 150 are virtually identical non-binding resolutions that were introduced in the House and Senate, respectively, in April 2019. H.Res. 296 includes the following language:

Whereas the United States has a proud history of recognizing and condemning the Armenian Genocide, the killing of 1.5 million 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;

....

Resolved, That it is the sense of the House of Representatives that it is the policy of the United States to—

- (1) commemorate the Armenian Genocide through official recognition and remembrance;
- (2) reject efforts to enlist, engage, or otherwise associate the United States Government with denial of the Armenian Genocide or any other genocide; and
- (3) encourage education and public understanding of the facts of the Armenian Genocide, including the United States role in the humanitarian relief effort, and the relevance of the Armenian Genocide to modern-day crimes against humanity.

Members of Congress could consider how passing H.Res. 296 or S.Res. 150 might affect the following:

- Relations between Turkey and the United States,¹⁰ and Turkey’s strategic orientation regarding the United States and the West, Russia, and other actors.
- U.S.-Turkey defense cooperation, including key Turkish procurement decisions on air defense (including the Russian S-400 system) and aircraft, and Turkish willingness to host U.S. and NATO military personnel and equipment.¹¹
- Congressional action on other legislation, including possible sanctions on Turkey,¹² and a provision in the FY2020 National Defense Authorization Act (S. 1790) that could—under certain conditions—lift a 32-year-old arms embargo on U.S. arms sales to the Republic of Cyprus.¹³

¹⁰ Turkey recalled its ambassadors from France and Germany when those countries’ legislatures passed measures on this issue in 2011 and 2016, respectively; Turkey recalled its ambassador from Washington in response to the October 2007 House Foreign Relations Committee vote to report H.Res. 106.

¹¹ See, e.g., Robert Tait and Ewen McCaskill, “Turkey threatens ‘serious consequences’ after US vote on Armenian genocide,” *Guardian*, March 5, 2010.

¹² CRS Insight IN11185, *Turkey Sanctions in Pending Legislation: Issues for Congress*, by Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas.

¹³ See, e.g., Bryant Harris, “Turkey lobbies Congress against lifting Cyprus arms embargo as tensions mount,” *Al-Monitor*, October 17, 2019.

- Turkish policies and public sentiment regarding Turkey's historically tense relations with Armenia.
- Turkish-led forces' actions in northern Syria, particularly vis-à-vis Kurdish or Christian civilian populations.¹⁴
- Turkish domestic treatment of its Armenian and other Christian and Jewish minorities and religious institutions.
- Reparations claims by individuals and groups affected by the events of 1915-1923.¹⁵

¹⁴ See, e.g., Mevlut Cavusoglu, "Why Turkey Took the Fight to Syria," *New York Times*, October 11, 2019; Wladimir van Wilgenburg and Amy Austin Holmes, "The international community must stop Turkey's ethnic cleansing plans in northern Syria," washingtonpost.com, October 11, 2019.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Rick Gladstone, "Armenian Groups Are Increasingly Focused on Reparations for Genocide," *New York Times*, April 23, 2015; "Reparations Expert Calls for Passage [of] Armenian Genocide Resolution in Capitol Hill Speech," *Armenian Weekly*, October 3, 2019.
