

House of Representatives Finally Recognizes Armenian Genocide

It is shocking that it has taken this long for even one house of the U.S. Congress to recognize this historic tragedy. Somehow it is always a “bad time” to upset the government of Turkey.



Late last month, the U.S. House of Representatives passed [a resolution](#) by an overwhelming margin putting the United States on record as recognizing the Armenian genocide at the hands of the Ottoman Empire. The 405-11 vote marks the first time either house of Congress has done so.

For decades, the U.S. government has refused to acknowledge that the systematic killings of 1.5 million Armenians during World War I constituted genocide. This has placed Washington outside the broad international consensus, in which scores of other governments—including Canada, France, Italy, Germany, Russia, and the Vatican—several United Nations bodies, as well as [forty-nine U.S. states](#), have [done so](#).

Unfortunately, the House resolution may be as far as the initiative goes. A companion resolution in the Senate, which was prepared to pass under unanimous consent on November 8, was blocked by Senator Lindsay Graham immediately following his meeting, along with a handful of other Republican senators, with Turkey’s [authoritarian president](#), Recep Tayyip Erdogan during his recent [Washington visit](#).

Erdogan [denies](#) there was ever any genocide, only “deportations” and “events” which he has [insisted](#) were “reasonable” for the period. The Turkish government has long claimed that violence was committed by both sides and the Armenians share the blame for the carnage.

Senator Graham, a strong Trump ally, [asserted that](#) the resolution recognizing the genocide was an effort to “sugarcoat history” and “rewrite it.” Similarly, President Donald Trump, who has [declared himself](#) a “big fan” of Erdogan, has [opposed](#) the bipartisan Congressional effort.

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Still, the House vote marks a significant step. Previous efforts in Congress have failed due to opposition from both Republican and Democratic administrations and lawmakers.

It is rather shocking that it has taken this long for even one house of Congress to recognize this historic reality. The facts are indisputable: Between 1915 and 1918, under orders from the Ottoman Empire leadership, an

estimated two million Armenians were [forcibly removed](#) from their homes in a region that had been part of the Armenian nation for more than 2,500 years. Three-quarters of them [died](#) as a result of execution, starvation, and related reasons.

Henry Morgenthau, the U.S. ambassador to the Ottoman Empire during that period, [noted](#) that, “When the Turkish authorities gave the orders for these deportations, they were merely giving the death warrant to a whole race; they understood this well, and, in their conversations with me, they made no particular attempt to conceal the fact”

While issuing a “death warrant to a whole race” would normally be considered genocide by any definition, the current U.S. administration is apparently not persuaded.

The Armenian Genocide Memorial, in Yerevan, Armenia, recognizes the 1.5 million killed by the Ottoman Empire during World War I. The United States government has never formally acknowledged the genocide.



The [Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide](#), signed and ratified by the United States, officially defines genocide as any effort “to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such.” Raphael Lemkin was the Polish Jewish lawyer who originally coined the term “genocide” in 1944. The earliest proponent of an international convention on its prevention and the punishment of its perpetrators, Lemkin [identified](#) the Armenian case as a definitive example.

The last attempt in Congress to pass a resolution acknowledging the genocide took place in 2010 and easily passed the House Foreign Affairs Committee. Following the committee vote, however, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton [announced](#) that “We are against this decision,” and pledged that the administration would “work very hard” to prevent the bill from coming to the floor.

Despite widespread support for the resolution by House Democrats, she expressed confidence that the Obama Administration would find a means of blocking the resolution, saying, “Now we believe that the U.S. Congress will not take any decision on this subject.”

Clinton was correct. Thanks to administration pressure, the bill died.

Similarly, in 2007, a resolution also [passed](#) the Foreign Affairs Committee, attracting 226 co-sponsors. However, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi—in response to claims from the Bush White House and Congressional colleagues of both parties that it would harm the “Global War on Terrorism”—[withdrew](#) the resolution from consideration before the full House.

A common theme in these earlier successful efforts to squash recognition of the genocide has been that it was a “bad time” to upset the government of Turkey, a NATO ally. The Bush Administration opposed the resolution back in 2007, on the grounds that it not jeopardize U.S. access to Turkish bases during its counter-insurgency war in Iraq. It was also considered a “bad time” by the Clinton Administration in 2000 because the United States was using its bases in Turkey to patrol the “no fly zones” in northern Iraq.

And it was considered a “bad time” under the Reagan Administration in 1985 and 1987, when similar resolutions were [put forward](#) because U.S. bases in Turkey were considered important listening posts for monitoring the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

So why has the [bipartisan leadership](#) of the House and an overwhelming majority of its members finally decide it is no longer a “bad time” to recognize this great crime against humanity?”

It may in part be a reaction to the [brutal Turkish invasion](#) of autonomous Kurdish regions in northern Syria abetted by President Trump, which drew outrage from both Democrats and Republicans. The Turkish aggression, along with Erdogan’s increasingly authoritarian rule, has alienated observers from across the ideological spectrum.

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Much of the credit, however, belongs to Armenian-Americans, historians, and human rights activists who have kept persisting in the importance of recognizing the genocide despite a shockingly-high level of ongoing denial.

As recently as the 1980s, the *Bulletin of the Department of State* [claimed](#) that “Because the historical record of the 1915 events in Asia Minor is ambiguous, the Department of State does not endorse allegations that the Turkish government committed genocide against the Armenian people.” Even more recently, in 2012, Paul Wolfowitz, who served as deputy secretary of defense for President George W. Bush, [stated](#) that “one of the things that impress me about Turkish history is the way Turkey treats its own minorities.”

The Middle East scholar most often cited by members of Congress as influencing their understanding of the region was the late historian Bernard Lewis, a genocide denier who served as a fellow at Washington’s Institute of Turkish Studies.

Opponents of recognition have argued that it is pointless for Congress to pass resolutions regarding historical events. Yet there were no such complaints regarding resolutions commemorating the Holocaust, nor are there normally complaints regarding the scores of dedicatory resolutions passed by Congress in recent years. And acknowledging genocide and other crimes is critical not just for the descendants of the victims, but for preventing them in the future. Adolf Hitler, responding to concerns about the legacy of his crimes, [once asked](#), “Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?”

At the same time, the failure of the United States to recognize the history of mass atrocities in our own country, as well as the millions killed as a result of wars of aggression in Vietnam and Iraq, make it difficult for us to lead in this area. Erdogan himself [noted](#), following the passage of the House resolution, that “The countries who have stains of genocide, slavery, colonialism in their history have no right to give lessons to Turkey.”

Even progressive Democratic Congresswoman Ilhan Omar [voted](#) “present” on the resolution rather than in favor, on the grounds that “true acknowledgement of historical crimes against humanity” should also include recognition of the enslavement of Africans and the genocide of American Indians.

But in fact, the United States has waited too long to recognize the genocide of Armenians and other crimes against humanity. The House vote serves as a reminder of the importance of acknowledging our own history, as well as those of other nations.