



## Biden poised to recognise Armenian genocide as Turkey left without friends

Claire Sadar

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Turkey has spent **millions of dollars** on sometimes **bizarre campaigns** to dissuade the American government from calling the murder and expulsion of the vast majority of the Armenians in Anatolia during World War One a genocide.

For decades, the United States government has tiptoed around the issue, afraid of the fallout it could precipitate in U.S.-Turkish relations.

Ultimately, all this money and effort appears to have been a waste. At the end of 2019, the United States **Congress** and **Senate** passed a resolution to officially “(1) commemorate the Armenian Genocide, the killing of 1.5 million Armenians by the Ottoman Empire from 1915 to 1923; (2) reject efforts to associate the U.S. government with efforts to deny the existence of the Armenian Genocide or any genocide; and (3) encourage education and public understanding about the Armenian Genocide.”

Now, statements coming from White House **officials** and President Joe Biden’s own history of supporting genocide recognition makes it **likely** that on April 24, Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day, he too will officially use the term “genocide” to describe the fate of the Ottoman Armenian community.

passed by Congress a year and a half ago. As a senator, Biden supported similar resolutions **as far back as 1984**. He was a **co-sponsor of the 1990 resolution** that spurred **contentious** debate between those opposed, led by Senator Robert Byrd, and those in favour, led by Senator Bob Dole.

Despite, or perhaps because of, his continued support for these ultimately failing resolutions, Biden has not wavered in his conviction that the U.S. government should recognise the Armenian Genocide. In a post on Medium to mark last year's Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day, then candidate Biden "pledge[d] to support a resolution recognising the Armenian Genocide and will make universal human rights a top priority for my administration".

Experts agree that Biden is likely to make an official declaration referring to the mass death and deportation of Ottoman Armenians in Anatolia as a genocide. The consensus is that not only does he genuinely believe that the events constitute that term, but the current, perhaps historically, low point in U.S.-Turkish relations makes this decision more politically feasible.

"Previously when the Armenian Genocide bill would be up for discussion on the Hill there would be a flurry of various groups, from foreign policy analysts who defended Turkey for real-politik reasons to pro-Israel groups who saw Turkey as an ally to defence contractors who didn't want to lose crucial arms sales," said Daphe McCurdy, Senior Associate at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

"That doesn't really exist anymore or to the extent it does, these pro-Turkey groups don't have a sympathetic ear among any U.S. policymakers whether on the Hill or in the administration," McCurdy said.

Nicholas Danforth, a non-resident fellow at the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy, concurs:

"Turkey has no friends left in Washington, and it is increasingly hard to make a geopolitical case that Turkey is an important enough ally, that not angering Turkey is important enough, to block the resolution," Danforth said.

A low point in bilateral relations may seem like the worst time to risk a statement on the genocide. Thus, it is perhaps surprising that the experts not only agree that if Biden does follow through with a genocide recognition statement, U.S.-Turkish relations will not be irrevocably

“It’s something the Turks will get angry about, they will probably recall their newly arrived ambassador, maybe they will ask the U.S. ambassador to leave for a time, but at the end of the day, there are too many real, pressing issues that these two countries have to deal with that are very imminent, they are not about history, they are not symbolic, they are real issues,” said Alan Makovsky, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress.

“If anything, because it’s the United States, there is going to be a lot of reasons to get past it,” he said.

“When it comes to the members of the Turkish-American diaspora who take their political cues from Ankara, the Biden administration’s recognition of the Armenian genocide could end up being a liberating development,” said Aykan Erdemir, Senior Director of the Turkey Program at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and a former member of the Turkish parliament.

“Until now, the bulk of the Turkish-American mobilisation in the United States has revolved around pushing back against various efforts to recognise the Armenian genocide,” Erdemir said.

“Once the issue is behind, the Turkish-American diaspora will have an opportunity to channelise its energies to more productive endeavours that will accrue positive dividends for themselves as well as for their countries of residence and origin.”

Some experts stress that Turkey sees the United States in different terms than EU countries, and that there is more symbolic weight to it taking this action, but that this was still not enough reason to believe that a permanent diplomatic breakdown was imminent. That of course does not mean that President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan will not take full advantage of any official statement by Biden in the service of domestic politics.

“Erdoğan is searching for any distraction from his political and economic weaknesses and will undoubtedly use this issue to do the same,” McCurdy said. “But at the end of the day, these antics will only get him so far if they don’t put food on people’s tables.

“That’s not to say that much of the Turkish public won’t be outraged by the decision, just that Erdoğan has been using anti-Americanism as a tool to garner political support for years and there are diminishing marginal

There will undoubtedly be segments of the Turkish population who are angry and offended by it if the president makes an official declaration using the term “genocide”, but Taner Akçam, a professor of history at Clark University, and one of the preeminent historians on the Armenian Genocide, cautioned that all news about how “average Turks” feel should be taken with a huge grain of salt.

“[The Turkish government] will put their position in the mouths of so-called ‘ordinary Turks’,” Akçam said. “Whatever we will see and we will hear about Turkish public reaction, will not be Turkish public reaction. If they allowed the free press in Turkey, public reaction would be totally different.”

For example, Akçam doubts that much of the ethnic Kurdish population in Turkey buy into Turkish government propaganda about what did or did not happen to the Armenians in Anatolia, given their own experience with violent cultural suppression, and subsequent government denial that it is happening.

Akçam also sees a wider cultural and political shift happening in Turkey, which is ultimately indicative of the weak international position the Turkish government now finds itself in.

“There is a basic change in Turkish society in understanding the Armenian Genocide. In the early days, before (prominent Armenian journalist) Hrant Dink’s assassination, in the 80s, 90s, we were the bad guy,” Akçam said. “We were dragged from courtroom to courtroom. We were attacked. There was a hate campaign against us. We were in a defensive position. Today, we won the psychological war in Turkey. Today, psychologically, the Turkish government is in a defensive position.”

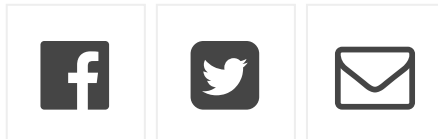
This does not mean that the Turkish government is just going to give in to international pressure and overwhelming historical evidence and stop denying that the killing and deportations that wiped Armenians from Anatolia constitute a genocide.

Akçam likens genocide denial in Turkey to racism in the United States. “Denialism is a political structure,” one that can only be defeated by democratisation and significant changes to Turkish society, he said.

The fact that the U.S. government has now politicised the historical facts has set back progress toward any such shift.

point, Washington has made it very easy for Erdoğan to turn around and say “look, they’re just saying this because they are angry at us now”, and this won’t prompt any kind of moral reckoning, this won’t prompt any kind of real, serious conversation in Turkey,” Danforth said.

“The refusal to take this step earlier when it would have been inconvenient, has irrevocably politicised it. I still think it is the right thing to do, but we should avoid feeling too good about it,” he said.



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