



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Situation Assessment | 6 May 2021

The Political Context for the Biden Administration’s Recognition of the “Armenian Genocide”

Implications for US-Turkish Relations

Unit for Political Studies

The Political Context for the Biden Administration's Recognition of the "Armenian Genocide"

Series: **Situation Assessment**

6 May 2021

Unit for Political Studies

The Unit for Political Studies is the Center's department dedicated to the study of the region's most pressing current affairs. An integral and vital part of the ACRPS' activities, it offers academically rigorous analysis on issues that are relevant and useful to the public, academics and policy-makers of the Arab region and beyond. The Unit for Political Studie draws on the collaborative efforts of a number of scholars based within and outside the ACRPS. It produces three of the Center's publication series: Assessment Report, Policy Analysis, and Case Analysis reports. .

Copyright © 2021 Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. All Rights Reserved.

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies is an independent research institute and think tank for the study of history and social sciences, with particular emphasis on the applied social sciences.

The Center's paramount concern is the advancement of Arab societies and states, their cooperation with one another and issues concerning the Arab nation in general. To that end, it seeks to examine and diagnose the situation in the Arab world - states and communities- to analyze social, economic and cultural policies and to provide political analysis, from an Arab perspective.

The Center publishes in both Arabic and English in order to make its work accessible to both Arab and non-Arab researchers.

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

Al-Tarfa Street, Wadi Al Banat

Al-Dayaen, Qatar

PO Box 10277, Doha

+974 4035 4111

www.dohainstitute.org

Table of Contents

Context of the Announcement	1
The Widening Rift between Washington and Ankara	1
A New Approach?	2
Turkey's Options	3
Conclusion	4



US President Joe Biden announced, in late April, that the United States had officially recognized the "Ottoman-era Armenian genocide,"⁽¹⁾ breaking with Washington's decades-long reluctance to adopt the Armenian narrative describing the events of 1915 as genocide in order to protect its strategic relations with Turkey. Armenians say that the events of 1915 caused the forced displacement and massacre of nearly a million and a half people, while Turkey insists that these numbers are exaggerated and that "hundreds of thousands of Muslims also died in Anatolia at the time due to combat, starvation, cold, and disease," and that "many that Armenian revolutionaries constituted a fifth column allied with Russia during World War I."⁽²⁾

Context of the Announcement

The White House statement signals a new era in US-Turkish relations, while seeking to balance this message to Turkey by avoiding significant provocation, not mentioning Turkey but rather holding "the Ottoman era" responsible for the events of 1915. The statement also intended to simply "affirm the history" and not "to cast blame but to ensure that what happened is never repeated."⁽³⁾ While the Turkish presidential spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin indicated that US officials had confirmed that the announcement would not provide a legal basis for potential compensation claims, this did not alleviate the anger of Ankara.⁽⁴⁾ Besides the symbolic gesture of the declaration, the move opens the door to compensation lawsuits in US courts. As the heir to the Ottoman Empire, Turkey fears that the increasing international recognition of the "Armenian Genocide" will lead to it being cast as a pariah state.⁽⁵⁾ Ankara has repeatedly claimed that the presentation of the events of 1915 has been subject to politicization and manipulation and has offered more than once to open the Ottoman and Armenian archives to historians to investigate the Armenian narrative of events. This narrative has, from the official Turkish point of view, become a tool for harassment by Western countries, most recently the United States, in airing out their political differences.

The Widening Rift between Washington and Ankara

This recent crisis between the United States and Turkey is the culmination of a series of tensions ongoing since the Obama administration, linked to a host of issues in the Middle East, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Caucasus region. The differences between the two countries were exacerbated by their responses to the Arab revolutions, especially in Syria and Washington's accusations that President Erdogan is supporting extremist Islamic factions in Syria, backing away from democracy in Turkey and violating human rights. Turkey, in turn, resents the ambiguous US position on the 2016

1 "Statement by President Joe Biden on Armenian Remembrance Day," The White House, 24/4/2021, accessed on 6/5/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/2QOrYDv>

2 "Turkey's Erdogan Slams Biden Over Armenian Genocide Statement," *Radio Free Europe*, 26/4/2021, accessed on 6/5/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3xRHJtJ>

3 "Statement by President Joe Biden on Armenian Remembrance Day."

4 Dominic Evans & Orhan Coskun, "Turkey Says it will Respond in Time to 'Outrageous' U.S. Genocide Statement," *Reuters*, 25/4/2021, accessed on 6/5/2021, at: <https://reut.rs/2SweOeM>

5 Soner Cagaptay, "Biden Recognizing the Armenian Genocide Shows How far Turkey and Erdogan Have Fallen," *NBC News*, 24/4/2021, accessed on 6/5/2021, at: <https://nbcnews.to/3nYYKxJ>



coup attempt. The relationship between the two countries during the Trump presidency declined to the point that Washington imposed harsh economic sanctions on Turkey in 2018 due to its detention of the American priest, Andrew Branson, on charges related to espionage, terrorism and support for the PKK, as well as cooperation with Fethullah Gülen. The Turkish preacher remains resident in the US following accusations that he orchestrated the failed 2016 coup attempt.

Furthering the tensions between the two countries is what Turkey considers US bias towards Greece in the dispute between the two countries over maritime borders and gas and oil rights in the eastern Mediterranean. This was followed by Turkey's support for Azerbaijan in its war with Armenia last year, and criticism of the position of the OSCE Minsk Group, which was formed in 1992 to mediate the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and includes Russia, France and the US. The group did not appreciate the Turkish support to Azerbaijan, which enabled it to regain large areas in the Nagorno-Karabakh region from Armenia.

However, the most important disputes between the two countries now, in addition to the Gülen issue, are Washington's support for Kurdish fighters in northeastern Syria and Turkey's purchase of Russian S-400 missiles. Ankara is openly resentful of Washington's support for the Syrian Democratic Forces, and its mainstay is the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), which is the armed wing of the Syrian Kurdistan Democratic Union Party. Ankara classifies the party as a terrorist organisation based on its association with the Turkish Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), while Washington considers it an ally in the war against the Islamic State in Syria. Turkey has launched several military operations against those forces, which has sparked US criticism and strained relations between the two parties.

Furthermore, Washington and NATO say that the S-400 defense system, which Ankara received it in the summer of 2019 following a deal it signed in 2017 with Russia, is not compatible with the defense systems of the alliance, and poses an intelligence threat to the American F-35 fighter jets that Turkey participated in manufacturing. Washington rejected Turkey's offer to cooperate in operating Russian missile systems in a way that addresses US and Atlantic concerns. The US Department of Defense has stopped the delivery of combat aircraft to Turkey and the Trump administration then imposed sanctions on Turkish defense industries late this year. Just two days before Biden's statement on the "Armenian Genocide", the US Defense Department formally removed Turkey from the project of countries participating in the manufacture of F-35 fighters.⁽⁶⁾

A New Approach?

Joe Biden is the first US president to formally recognize the "Armenian Genocide." Ronald Reagan referred to "the genocide of the Armenians" in a 1981 speech commemorating Holocaust victims, while both George W. Bush and Barak Obama pledged to their voters, as presidential candidates, to announce their recognition, they were forced to backtrack on their pledge out of consideration for the alliance with Turkey.⁽⁷⁾ Even when Congress, both House of Representatives and Senate,

⁶ "Why Turkey's Expulsion from F-35 Fighter Jet Program Could Cost the US Dearly?" *The Eurasian Times*, 24/4/2021, accessed on 6/5/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3h23npm>

⁷ Cameron Peters, "Why Biden's Statement Recognizing the Armenian Genocide is a Big Deal," *VOX*, 24/4/2021, accessed on 6/5/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3enBoyx>

recognized the "Armenian Genocide" in December 2019,⁽⁸⁾ the Trump administration distanced itself from the matter. What prompted Biden to change this approach?

First, it seems clear that there is no personal friendship at the leadership level of the two countries, confirmed by a leaked recording last August of a meeting with Biden, while he was a presidential candidate, conducted by the New York Times in December 2019. Biden said that he would adopt a "different approach" in dealing with President Erdogan, by which Washington should embolden Turkish opposition leaders "to be able to take on and defeat Erdogan. Not by a coup, not by a coup, but by the electoral process." Biden expressed concern about "Erdogan's approach to Kurds in Turkey, his partial military cooperation with Russia, and access to U.S. airfields in the country, a NATO ally."⁽⁹⁾ In a clear indication that the matter was not merely ill-considered statements by a presidential candidate, Erdogan was the last ally for Biden to contact, three months after his inauguration as president, on April 23, during which he told him that he would recognize the "Armenian genocide" the next day.⁽¹⁰⁾

Some argue that this turn of events is evidence of Turkey's declining position in the new US approach to the Middle East, and an expression of a US institutional shift towards it.⁽¹¹⁾ In the past, the electoral promises of the presidents regarding recognition of the "Armenian Genocide" were challenged by the Pentagon and State Department, but these institutions have made no effort to prevent it this time. On the contrary, these institutions express clear concern about the Turkish-Russian rapprochement and Turkey's objection to some US policies in the Middle East, especially with regard to the SDF in Syria, as well as human rights issues and the reversal of democratic progress.⁽¹²⁾ Indeed, some members of the Biden administration now consider that Turkey, with its current approach, has become a "threat to the interests of the United States in the Middle East."⁽¹³⁾

Turkey's Options

Despite the Turkish officials' threat that the country would respond to the US recognition of the "Armenian Genocide," Ankara seems reluctant to take retaliatory measures, preferring to wait for the two countries' leaders to meet during the NATO summit in Brussels next June. It seems that the Biden administration is betting that Turkey will refrain from escalation due to its difficult economic conditions, which were only exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, and the depreciation of the lira against the dollar.⁽¹⁴⁾ It is unlikely that Turkey will react to a declaration that is purely symbolic,

8 Aaron Blake, "Biden Goes where His Predecessors Wouldn't in Recognizing Armenian Genocide," *The Washington Post*, 24/4/2021, accessed on 6/5/2021, at: <https://wapo.st/3b86yYL>

9 Jonathan Spicer, "Turkey Slams Biden's Past Call for U.S. to Back Erdogan Opponents," *Reuters*, 15/8/2020, accessed on 6/5/2021, at: <https://reut.rs/3hcWy4a>

10 Peters.

11 Cagaptay

12 John Hudson & Kareem Fahim, "Biden Calls Mass Killing of Armenians a 'Genocide' in Break with Previous Presidents," *The Washington Post*, 24/4/2021, accessed on 6/5/2021, at: <https://wapo.st/3h9hto5>

13 Cagaptay.

14 Evans & Coskun.



limited to a verbal fulfilment of the promise Biden made to his voters. However, if Turkey decides to respond, further jeopardizing their relations, it has a number of options, including:

1. Freezing the 1980 Defense and Economic Cooperation Agreement, which provides for intelligence sharing between the two countries, conducting joint exercises, as well as facilitating US military access to Turkish air bases, from which the United States benefited in its intervention in both Iraq and Syria.⁽¹⁵⁾
2. Preventing the US from accessing the Kürecik early warning radar base in southern Turkey. This base is an important part of NATO's ballistic missile defense capabilities.⁽¹⁶⁾
3. Restricting the US ability to use the Incirlik Air Base in Adana, which will affect Washington's capabilities in Iraq and Syria.⁽¹⁷⁾
4. Reducing diplomatic efforts to support Afghan peace talks.⁽¹⁸⁾
5. Pursuing greater rapprochement efforts with China, Russia and Iran; the triangle of powers that Washington seeks to contain at the regional and international levels.
6. It is likely that Turkey will take a pragmatic approach, not responding to a symbolic gesture with political geopolitical steps.

Conclusion

Turkish-US relations are undergoing an unprecedented crisis, transcending the personal issues between the two countries and mainly stemming from the difference in their strategic vision and interests. In the Biden era, the United States seems to be seeking to contain increasing Turkish influence within a narrow coastal strip in the eastern Mediterranean by supporting the aspirations of the Kurds on Turkey's southern borders. However, Turkey's abandonment of its NATO membership is not an option, and Washington's definitive abandonment of its alliance with Turkey, which has the second largest army in NATO, also seems impossible. Because that will push it to get closer to Russia, China and Iran, which Washington classifies as a "triangle" of strategic challenges. Economically, it is unlikely for Ankara to break its close association with Western economies or give up conducting commercial transactions in dollars, despite talk of the use of national currencies in bilateral trade relations with Russia and China. This means that the two countries will tend to try to manage their differences during the next stage, and to avoid slipping towards creating further damage.

¹⁵ Selcan Hacaoglu & Firat Kozok, "Erdogan Refrains from Harsh Response to Biden Row Over 'Genocide' Label," *Bloomberg*, 26/4/2021, accessed on 6/5/2021, at: <https://bloom.bg/3b60obv>

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Diego Cupolo, "US-Turkey Relations to be Tested by Possible Armenian Genocide Recognition," *Al Monitor*, 22/4/2021, accessed on 6/5/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/2Rsyk1v>

¹⁸ Evans & Coskun.