

Ethnic Epic

■ Armenian-Americans and the Turkish government use different strategies in their ongoing battle over a genocide resolution.

By Julie Kosterlitz

By the time the Armenian-Americans from Detroit arrived in Washington on October 25—one of several such contingents from around the country—to try to rescue their decades-long dream, it was already too late.

Just two weeks earlier, the House Foreign Affairs Committee had approved the Affirmation of the United States Record on the Armenian Genocide Resolution, and Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., vowed to bring it to a floor vote. But since then more than a dozen co-sponsors had withdrawn their support, under intense pressure from the government of Turkey, its high-wattage Washington lobbyists, and a Who's Who of Bush administration officials and military leaders.

By day's end, the measure's lead sponsor, Democrat Adam Schiff—whose Los Angeles-area district includes a significant Armenian enclave—would write Pelosi asking her to postpone the vote.

The Motor City delegation, however, was not conceding. "We'll tighten our belts, stand shoulder to shoulder, and

continue to struggle until this is passed," said Narses Gedigian, a retired Ford Motor manager and the Detroit director of the Armenian National Committee of America. "It is going to pass," echoed banker Ralph Kourtjian just before the group returned to the airport that day.

The long-running battle in Congress between the Turks and Armenians is instructive, a study in both clashing viewpoints and the two different ways that political power is applied: the Turks' use of the diplomatic leverage of a foreign government versus the Armenians' use of the ballot-box clout of an American ethnic group. At issue is how the U.S. government will refer to the mass slaughter and deadly deportations of more than a million Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during World War I.

Whether it was genocide—a systematic effort to eradicate a national, racial, religious, or ethnic group—as Armenian-Americans and most genocide scholars contend, or a tragic but more nuanced event, as the Turkish government and a few scholars argue, may seem like an arcane historical debate. But the outcome bears directly on the core identity of both the sizable Armenian-American diaspora and the Republic of Turkey, a vital U.S. ally.

In a technical sense, the Turks' government-to-government realpolitik has triumphed, preventing a full House vote three times since 2000. But even Turkey's allies recognize that the grassroots Armenian lobby has effectively fought them to a draw. The issue keeps coming

back, and each skirmish raises its profile.

"One of the major problems has been that it's the Turkish government that has led the charge in presenting the Turkish position, and there's a need to get Turkish-Americans involved and to be more active citizens," says Lincoln McCurdy, the former longtime director of a pro-Turkish business group. It is a problem that McCurdy and some prominent Turkish-Americans are now hoping to remedy.

Part of the Armenian-Americans' power comes from the focus and persistence they bring to the issue. "The Turks thought, 'After the first generation, they [Armenians] will forget.' I'm second generation, and the third are still on it," says Kourtjian, whose fellow lobbyists included college senior Ani Hagopian and Karine Birazian, who put a nursing career on hold to become an Armenian National Committee organizer.

The Armenian diaspora has consciously nurtured this sense of identity through close-knit families; the Armenian Apostolic Church; and, in many communities, separate Armenian schools and newspapers. The passage of time has actually boosted the Armenian community's political strength. Those from the second and third generations bring more affluence, education, and sophistication to the cause than do their traumatized, mostly working-class parents and grandparents.

They have had particular success outside Washington: 40 state governments have recognized an Armenian holocaust. And Armenian-Americans successfully lobbied the Massachusetts Legislature in the late 1990s to require that school children be taught about the Armenian genocide.

Now the younger generation is making its case through popular culture. Author and Colgate University professor Peter Balakian's 2004 book about the Armenian genocide and the American response, *The Burning Tigris*, was a best-seller. Prominent Armenian-Americans helped underwrite the 2006 PBS documentary *The Armenian Genocide*, and the Armenian-American members of the Grammy-winning



■ Generation to Generation

■ The grassroots delegation from Michigan that lobbied Congress included Armenian-Americans of varying ages.

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heavy-metal group System of a Down wrote a song about the genocide and put information booths at their concerts.

The fourth estate has also been lobbied. In 2003, *The Boston Globe* began allowing unqualified use of the term “genocide” to describe the events of 1915 after meeting with Armenian activists, and in 2004 *The New York Times* did the same.

Armenian-Americans are also poised to erect a visible symbol of their cause in the nation’s capital: an Armenian Genocide Museum, to be housed in a historic former bank building just blocks from the White House. Despite legal wrangling among donors, sponsors vow to complete the project by 2011.

If the diaspora’s cause was previously hurt by the perception that it involved an Old World blood feud, it has increasingly been helped by the rise of a separate anti-genocide movement over the past decade.

After Americans’ belated recognition of the unchecked ethnic slaughter in Rwanda in 1994, an informal network of academics, human-rights activists, and Jewish Americans has been organizing to stop and prevent similar tragedies. The creation of the International Association of Genocide Scholars, as well as Samantha Power’s Pulitzer Prize-winning 2003 book, *A Problem From Hell*, have both fostered the issue’s rising importance. In the past few years, grassroots groups were created to stop the massacre of civilians in Sudan’s Darfur region. Armenian-American groups have joined the Save Darfur Coalition, the Genocide Intervention Network, and others.

The anti-genocide movement, in turn, has helped give the Armenians’ cause more contemporary relevance. “Turkey’s policy of denying the Armenian Genocide gives license to those who perpetrate genocide everywhere,” the officers of the International Association of Genocide Scholars wrote in a letter to members of Congress earlier this year in support of the House resolution. “Little by little, we see the growth of an [anti-]genocide political constituency,” says Aram Hamparian, a third-generation Armenian-American who heads the Armenian National Committee of America, one of the diaspora’s two Washington-based lobby groups.

The anti-genocide movement has also helped Armenians to make inroads with another powerful lobby that has to date sided with Turkey: American Jewish organ-

izations. Because Turkey has been one of Israel’s few friends in the region, such Jewish groups as the American Jewish Congress, the Anti-Defamation League, and B’nai B’rith International have opposed the Armenian genocide resolutions. Until recently, the Turkish Embassy also retained PR consultants Jason Epstein, a former lobbyist for B’nai B’rith, and Lenny Ben-David, a former deputy chief of mission at Israel’s embassy in Washington, in part as liaisons to Jewish leaders.

In August, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan met with Jewish leaders in New York and pressed them to help block the resolution.

Increasingly, however, local Jewish groups are siding with Armenian groups. In August, under pressure from chapters in New England, ADL President Abe Foxman finally called the events of 1915 “tantamount to genocide” but still said the

Turkey had **high-wattage lobbyists and a Who’s Who of the Bush administration**

pressing Congress not to pass the genocide resolution.

House resolution was a “counterproductive diversion” that could put Turkey’s Jewish community at risk.

The Armenian-Americans’ public lobbying has convinced some that Turkey’s reliance on powerful high-level advocates—paid or otherwise—is no longer sufficient.

Turkey’s latest victory took far more effort than its prior one in a Republican-controlled Congress. At that time, the secretary of State merely sent a letter of opposition, Schiff said, but this time, President Bush, the secretaries of State and Defense, members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Gen. David Petraeus all lobbied House members in “the most intensified effort I’ve seen.”

Turkey also had to supplement its prominent Republican lobbyist, former House Speaker Bob Livingston, R-La., with a high-priced Democratic one, for-

mer Minority Leader Dick Gephardt, D-Mo., who had supported the resolution as a member of Congress.

Even so, Schiff argued, Turkey won mainly due to a last-minute turn of world events. After Iraqi-based Kurdish rebels attacked Turkish soldiers in mid-October, the Bush administration argued that the measure jeopardized U.S.-Turkish relations just when the United States was urgently seeking to dissuade Turkey from invading northern Iraq. A successful floor vote, Schiff argued, is now just a matter of time—and timing.

Some Turkish-Americans seem to fear that he is right. A small, affluent group has hired McCurdy to start the Turkish Coalition of America to help create a grassroots lobby. The sponsors, whom McCurdy won’t name, have provided a budget of “well under \$1 million.”

Forging an effective lobby, McCurdy acknowledges, will be tough. The Turkish-American community is about a third the size of the Armenian one, McCurdy says, and is “one of the most fragmented ethnic groups in the United States,” in part because Turkey is officially secular and emigrants lack the built-in sense of community that Armenians get from their church.

Up to now, the closest thing to a grassroots lobby has been the Assembly of Turkish American Associations, an umbrella group for 60 local organizations. But for most of the past year, the assembly has been embroiled in an internal power struggle from which it is only now beginning to re-emerge.

Instead, most of Turkey’s nongovernment lobbying support in the United States has come from the American Turkish Council, the business group that McCurdy founded. The council’s board is chaired by Brent Scowcroft, national security adviser for President George H.W. Bush, and includes executives from Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, and other defense firms.

McCurdy is holding seminars to teach Turkish-American groups around the country how to get involved in the political process.

That the Turkish lobby relies so heavily on McCurdy—a self-described Christian Anglo from Indiana—is emblematic of how far that effort has yet to go. ■

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