

# Biden drops a genocide bomb on Erdogan

Biden's curiously timed statement on WWI atrocity against Ottoman Armenians drives US-Turkey relations to a new low.



Then US Vice President Joe Biden (L) and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in 2016. Biden called Erdogan the day before making his announcement on Armenia. Photo: AFP/Kayhan Ozer/Turkey's Presidential Press Service

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Over the weekend, President Joe Biden became the first US leader in history to acknowledge that the World War I-era deaths of about 1.5 million Ottoman Armenians constituted a genocide.

In doing so, he ended decades of US hedging on this controversial subject, while also satisfying many in the Armenian diaspora and in the Caucasian country itself.

Yet Biden's acknowledgment also plunged US-Turkish relations to a new low.

“We entirely reject this statement,” Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said, following Biden’s announcement, adding: “Political opportunism is the greatest betrayal to peace and justice.”

The US ambassador to Ankara was duly summoned for an official complaint, while Turkish opposition parties also joined in to denounce Biden’s move.

“This statement will cause irreparable wounds and have an adverse impact on US-Turkey relations,” an April 25 statement from the main opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP) representative office in Washington read.

Biden’s statement thus becomes another dispute to add to the long list of disagreements between Turkey and the US.

This list includes Turkish allegations of US support for groups Ankara sees as terrorists in Syria, Turkey’s purchase of Russian S-400 anti-aircraft missiles and alleged Turkish busting of US sanctions on Iranian oil and gas.

Yet, it may be that with relations already so poor, “there was no additional strategic risk for the US in doing this,” Hrach Tchilingirian, from Oxford University’s Faculty of Oriental Studies, told Asia Times.

At the same time, too, while in the short-term, Biden’s acknowledgment has undoubtedly made poor US-Turkish relations worse, it may also create the potential for longer-term normalization.

“This statement closes the file,” Tchilingirian added. “Now they have to move on.”



A picture released by the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute purportedly shows Armenians hung by Ottoman forces in Constantinople in June 1915. Photo: AFP/AGMI

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## **Dark times**

The Armenian genocide refers to the organized killing of some 1.5 million ethnic Armenians - and the displacement of some two million more - during the death throes of the Ottoman Empire.

That empire - the precursor to modern Turkey - included a large Armenian population, spread throughout its extensive domains.

In 1915, during World War I, the Ottoman authorities - who deeply mistrusted the Armenian community - ordered most of these people out of their homes to resettlement areas in remote regions.

These relocations quickly turned into death marches, as defenseless Armenians

were attacked by Turkish and Kurdish irregulars - and sometimes regular Ottoman troops and police.

Many, indeed, never made it to their destinations.

In recent years, Turkey has acknowledged that this horror did occur.

Indeed, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said in his own April 24 message, addressed to the Armenian patriarch of Istanbul, that, "I remember with respect the Ottoman Armenians, who lost their lives under the harsh conditions of the First World War, and offer my condolences to their grandchildren."

For Ankara, though, those "harsh conditions" do not amount to "genocide."

This has long infuriated most Armenians, for whom the catastrophic events of those years shaped much of their present identity - and constitute a major barrier to any reconciliation between Armenia and Turkey.



A row of 10 Thunderbolt II planes, also known as 'tank killers,' at the Incirlik Air Base in Adana, Turkey, on October 22, 2015. Photo: AFP/Incirlik Air Base/Anadolu Agency

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## **Ways forward**

Now, many are waiting to see whether responses from Ankara to the US move will constitute anything more than verbal denunciations.

Potential consequences range from a possible impact on current efforts to smooth the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, to uncertainty over continued US use of a major military base in Turkey.

Regarding the first, since Biden announced the US would pull out in September, Washington has been trying to arrange a power-sharing administration to take over, once it has withdrawn.

A conference on this - involving Turkey - is due to take place in Istanbul after the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

“Turkey could spoil this conference,” Ozgur Unluhisarcikli, the German Marshal Fund’s Ankara Director, told Asia Times, “as it wouldn’t have any impact on Turkey’s security, but Biden needs to make sure the US withdrawal isn’t a disaster.”

The military base - Incirlik in southeastern Turkey - is a Turkish facility that is also a NATO airbase, used by the US air force for many of its missions around the region.

Closing it to US planes might have a serious impact on American military capability in Syria and Iraq.

In those neighboring countries, “since 2019, under an agreement with the US, Turkey hasn’t made any more incursions into northern Syria,” says Unluhisarcikli, “but could do now. Likewise, in Iraq, Turkey could take action and go in there.”

## **Potential versus likelihood**

Yet, for all these possibilities, doubts remain if Turkey or the US are really looking for confrontation right now.

Biden’s statement on the genocide may contain some clues on this, too.

In it, the US leader stressed the historical, Ottoman-era nature of the horror.

“He didn’t mention Turkey at all,” points out Unluhisarcikli. “He even used the old name for Istanbul - Constantinople. This was Biden providing Turkey with some leeway.”

The US president had also called Erdogan the day before making his announcement, giving the Turkish leader fair warning and allowing him to stress Ankara’s continuing importance to the US.

This was also the first time Biden had spoken to the Turkish leader since taking office in January, tying the genocide announcement to a resumption of US-Turkish presidential dialogue.

Erdogan also participated in the US-sponsored Earth Summit last week, taking a generally positive view of this new US effort to lead the global fight against climate change.

“Turkey is not going to break diplomatic relations with the US over this,” says Tchilingarian. “It just ends something that has been going on for 50 years, with the US saying, ‘this is our position.’ Turkey doesn’t have to agree with it.”



Armenia supporters watch from a balcony during a rally in Hollywood commemorating the 106th anniversary of the Armenian genocide on April 24, 2021, in Los Angeles, California. Photo: AFP/Mario Tama/Getty Images

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For Biden, too, acknowledging the genocide fulfills a campaign pledge he made to Armenian-American voters, while also establishing that “he’s someone ready to acknowledge shameful events in the past,” Unluhisarcikli adds. “Whether that be in the US, with support for Black Lives Matter, or elsewhere.”

This establishment of moral leadership is clearly important to Biden.

Yet, to many in Turkey, such moves may not appear so noble.

“To many, this singling out of Turkey seems to highlight a perceived ‘double standard’ in the West,” Unluhisarcikli says. “Citizens of Turkey will make a judgment from this about the US that will be a problem, in the longer run.”

For many Armenians, too, the whole issue illustrates what they have regrettably come to expect, as the long struggle for recognition has gone on.

“You know that under the veil of moral certitude,” says Tchilingirian, “the genocide is just being used for political gains. Its politicization does make many Armenians pretty angry.”

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Source: <https://asiatimes.com/2021/04/biden-drops-a-genocide-bomb-on-erdogan/>

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