

News From _____

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Byrd Commemorates Founding of the Republic of Turkey

Washington, DC – Senator Robert C. Byrd, D.W.Va., Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, delivered remarks on the Senate floor today to commemorate the 84th anniversary of the founding of the Republic of Turkey.

Senator Byrd's remarks are below.

Mr. President, today marks the 84th anniversary of the founding of the Republic of Turkey. It is an auspicious occasion to commemorate the abiding and enduring partnership between two great nations.

In 1923, following the collapse of the 600-year old Ottoman Empire and a three-year war of independence, a Turkish World War I hero, Mustafa Kemal, helped found the Republic of Turkey. Kemal, who was later given the name "Ataturk," meaning "father of the Turks," rejected the crumbling structures and outdated modes of empire, and embraced instead a platform of reform and modernization – a legacy that continues in Turkey to this day.

Today, Turkey is the most successful example in the Muslim World of a secular, representative democracy. Its economy has grown at a record pace in recent years, to become the world's 19th-largest. Literacy and education rates continue to climb, as life expectancy has improved and poverty rates have declined. Turkey stands as an inspiration to reformers in the greater Middle East and throughout the world.

Turkey has been a consistent and loyal ally of the people of the United States. From World War II, when Turkey entered the fight on the side of the Allies, to the cementing of the U.S.-Turkish alliance in the 1947 Truman Doctrine, to Turkey's accession to the North American Treaty Organization in 1952, Turkey has been a friend of the American people. During the long Cold War, Turkey was a bulwark on the edge of the Iron Curtain, and a critical ally. Turkey later helped the United States to patrol the No-Fly Zones over Iraq after the first Persian Gulf War, and aided the U.S. armed forces in Afghanistan after the September 11 attacks. Turkey, which has the second-largest army in NATO, commanded the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan twice, in 2002 and 2005, and Turkish troops continue to contribute to security efforts there. It is difficult to overstate the critical importance of Turkey's cooperation with U.S. missions in the region; U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates recently estimated that seventy percent of the air cargo deployed into Iraq to support U.S. troops there transits through air bases in Turkey.

Turkey, as a predominantly Muslim country with an important bilateral relationship with Israel, seeks to play a constructive role in Middle East peace negotiations, and continues to be an important ally in a dangerous and turbulent region. It occupies strategically critical territory between Europe and Asia, bordering such challenging neighbors as Iran, Syria, and Iraq. Furthermore, as the United States increasingly looks to diversify its sources of energy, it is important to remember that Turkey forms a crucial energy corridor to the West, capable of bringing oil and natural gas from the steppes of Eurasia to the shores of the Mediterranean Sea.

Turkey is, in short, central to the interests of the United States. Now is a good time to be reminded of that fact, as tensions build in the Kurdish region, and tempers flare over the proper words to use to describe a century-old tragedy. Whatever one's views may be about that tragedy, politically, economically, geographically, strategically, and militarily, as our soldiers are in harm's way in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States can ill-afford to lose such an important friend and ally.

This is a critical moment for Turkey. The Turkish people recently elected a new government, led by Prime Minister Erdogan and President Abdullah Gul. These decisive elections demonstrated the vibrant and healthy spirit of Turkey's democracy, and the commitment of its people to the democratic process. However, the young government is facing a number of serious challenges as it simultaneously seeks to guard against a very real threat from Kurdish terrorists, assuage Turkish nationalists and the military, and maintain the secular character of the state, all while continuing Turkey's bid for European Union membership. We should offer the Turkish government all the support we can give in these noble endeavors.

Much like the United States, Turkey continues to struggle with the darker moments of its history. The terrible treatment of Armenians prior to and during the First World War, as well as the treatment of other minorities, including Greeks, Alevis, and Kurds, is a matter that continues to haunt the Turkish people. In recent years, however, there have been encouraging signs: historians' conferences, attempts to improve relations with Armenia, and growing acceptance of the Kurdish language.

This is what free people and open democracies do. They debate and examine their history, and the conscience of their people. Given time and patience, their pasts can be confronted in a truthful and candid way. Many of us would like to see more progress from Turkey in this area. There continue to be issues about which our two countries disagree. This should not be a surprise; members of the same family disagree at times, and our best friends are often those who criticize us most openly. But there is a time for criticism, and a time for praise. Today is a day to celebrate the great Turkish nation and its people, and to acknowledge the strong ties that bind our countries together. That is the reason I am cosponsoring a Resolution with my colleague Senator Gordon Smith - - to affirm the friendship and alliance of the American and Turkish people. May our ties continue to grow stronger with the passage of time.

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