

This American Pastor Remains at Erdogan's Mercy

As Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan assumed near-dictatorial powers following his dubious victory in a constitutional referendum April 16, Andrew Brunson, a Christian pastor from North Carolina, was marking his sixth month of incarceration inside a Turkish prison.

Brunson, who has lived in Turkey with his family for the last 23 years, was the head of the Resurrection Church in the coastal city of Izmir—that is, until he was detained last October on the vague and unsubstantiated charge of “membership in an armed terrorist organization.”

In a recent interview with North Carolina-based WTDV, Brunson's daughter, Jacqueline, expressed what many Americans were thinking when she exclaimed, “I mean, he's an American citizen. It's kind of outrageous to think that this is happening to an American citizen.”

While American citizens living or working in the Middle East are no strangers to assassinations, hostage-taking and terrorist acts, what makes Brunson's case doubly outrageous is that his imprisonment is taking place in Turkey—traditionally an ally of the U.S., a member of NATO and widely regarded in the years prior to Erdoğan's rise as the ideal model for a secular state with a Muslim majority.

Turkish officials have remained unmoved by outside pleas for Brunson's release. Binali Yildirim—the prime minister whose position has been abolished as a direct result of Erdoğan's constitutional overhaul—told reporters in March that there was a possibility of putting Brunson on trial sooner rather than later, but he added, “As you will appreciate, judiciary matters are not directly controlled by us.”

The only thing we should appreciate is the irony of a Turkish leader talking about his country's independent judiciary less than a year after thousands of judges, university teachers, military officers and others were purged following the murky coup attempt against Erdoğan. Sadly, Brunson's continued imprisonment has become a card for the Turks to play in negotiations, as Erdoğan continues to pressure the U.S. into extraditing the Pennsylvania-based exiled Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen, whom he insists orchestrated the failed coup of 2016. But it's easier for Yildirim to pretend Turkish justice follows similar principles to American justice than to admit Brunson is the hostage of a populist tyrant.

As for Erdoğan, he does not appear to feel obliged to let up on his program of political repression in the wake of the referendum. If anything, the repression is escalating, with hundreds of arrests already reported within three days of the referendum result. Given the slim majority in favor of Erdoğan's campaign for an executive presidency—48.6 percent of Turks voted against, and there were multiple reports of electoral violations—this was to be expected.

Erdoğan has the right to feel confident. Yes, he will continue to face widespread internal resistance. Yes, he will be the target of Western, and especially European, condemnation for his actions and statements. But when such challenges arise, he can point to the rest of the Middle East, presenting himself as a bulwark against both the rising Iranian-led Shi'a crescent as well as Sunni terrorism in the form of Islamic State and other jihadi groups.

Of course, the situation is far more complex. Turkey has extensive business relations with Iran, and both countries share the common goal of crushing Kurdish aspirations for independence. As far as Islamic State is concerned, Erdoğan sees the group as a subsidiary concern in his brutal war against the Kurds in eastern Turkey and Syria. Yet if any Muslim leader can be considered a bridge, Erdoğan can stake a

claim to the status. He may be a populist Islamist who delights in crude anti-Semitic and anti-Western rhetoric—he has wondered aloud whether Israel’s government is “worse than Hitler,” and he has described the current Dutch and German governments as “Nazis”—but he is also the custodian of a long and complex diplomatic, security and political relationship with Western countries, including the U.S. and Israel.

American foreign policy conservatives have often told me that, as deeply unpleasant as Erdoğan’s regime is, undermining him is hardly a priority when you consider what else is going on in the region. As for Israel and the American Jewish leadership, both appear to have unlimited tolerance for Erdoğan’s anti-Semitic outbursts—condemning them, certainly, but never severing ties because of them. Again, their reasoning is pretty much the same: Erdoğan is a foul character running a nasty regime, but he has been and can continue to be a rare regional partner for Israel.

Since Erdoğan can now remain Turkey’s president until 2029—assuming neither his health nor his iron-fisted rule wavers between now and then—there will be plenty of time to determine whether this realist approach towards him can hold up. Part of the answer will depend on what Erdoğan does for the West.

I doubt he will moderate his wild rhetoric. I’m skeptical of any claim that he can be as reliable an ally of the West as Israel is. I don’t see him abandoning the Palestinian terrorists of Hamas—who, incidentally, were delighted by the referendum result. Going forward, Erdoğan will be more enemy than friend. {eo}

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