

Does This US Missionary's Fate Hinge on Setting Free a Militant Islamic Man?

Rev. Andrew Brunson was first detained in Turkey, without warning, for two months from Oct. 7, 2016, mostly spent in solitary confinement. Then he was jailed for the next three months in an overcrowded cell with 18 Turks.

But after 23 years of church work in Turkey, all carried out openly, the American Protestant pastor has yet to see any evidence that he's a threat to Turkey's national security.

Even his Turkish lawyer, who was finally granted access to Brunson only after he was sent to prison on 9 Dec., cannot access the confidential file of Interior Ministry allegations against the 49-year-old Christian.

After five months, Turkish authorities still have not unsealed the case documents against Brunson, to enable his lawyer to defend him in a court trial.

Last week, Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim commented publicly for the first time about Brunson's case, telling American journalists at an Ankara luncheon that Turkey will consider "accelerating" the trial process of the jailed pastor.

The prime minister insisted it was "nonsensical" to believe suggestions that Turkey is holding Rev. Brunson "hostage" until the United States agrees to extradite Fethullah Gülen, the Islamic cleric accused by Ankara of orchestrating a failed military coup to overthrow the Turkish government last July.

"These matters are separate," Yildirim told *USA Today*.

But even so, when asked about Brunson, Yildirim immediately

brought up Turkey's frustration that Washington still has not responded to Turkey's repeated requests to extradite the Islamic cleric, who is living in Pennsylvania. The Obama administration had insisted that Turkey provide clear evidence satisfying U.S. judicial processes.

"I'm not establishing a connection between the two cases, but such an incident [coup] of a large scale was not taken seriously by the Obama administration," he declared.

Prime Minister Yildirim's comments on March 9 were the Turkish government's highest-level commentary to be made public to date regarding Rev. Brunson's case.

The local prosecutor in the port city of Izmir, where Brunson pastored the legally-registered Izmir Resurrection Church, confirmed on March 15 that investigations into the church leader's contacts, telephone calls and other activities are "moving along".

U.S., U.N. Diplomatic Advocacy

U.S. Senator James Lankford had discussed Brunson's case with Justice Ministry officials when he visited Ankara back on Dec. 20, noting that his imprisonment was based on "unsubstantiated allegations" and that the local prosecutor "has yet to produce compelling evidence against Pastor Brunson."

"America sees this as both a matter of religious freedom and safety for its citizens," Lankford stressed.

On Feb. 15, the chairman of the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Sen. Bob Corker, wrote a letter signed by 78 US congressmen to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, urging Brunson's immediate release and return to the United States.

"There appears to be no evidence to substantiate the charges against him for membership in an armed terrorist organization," the letter stated. "Moreover, your government

has repeatedly denied regular and appropriate access to legal counsel and American consular services.”

A written intervention was filed on Feb. 13 before the U.N. Human Rights Commission by the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ), which has mounted a global campaign on Brunson’s behalf. The statement called for Brunson’s quick release from “wrongful detention and imprisonment” and urged the U.N. Human Rights Council to “call upon Turkey to honor its obligations” under its own constitution.

In a further oral intervention to the same Council on March 10, ACLJ stated, “Pastor Brunson’s detention appears to be related to his work as a Christian minister, making his arrest and imprisonment a violation of both Turkey’s Constitution and international agreements to which Turkey is party, as well as of Pastor Brunson’s fundamental rights.”

Tens of thousands of judges, prosecutors, journalists, military personnel and educators have been arrested over the past nine months as “terrorism suspects” in the wide-ranging legal probe against the Gülen movement, which Ankara now identifies as the Fethullah Gülen Terrorist Organization (FETO).

But the Turkish media have remained largely silent about the American’s inclusion with FETO suspects, rarely mentioning recent diplomatic advocacy efforts launched on his behalf.

In mid-December, just after Brunson was sent to prison, two pro-government newspapers claimed that the pastor had been arrested as part of the sweeping national investigation against the Gülen movement.

Basing a short Dec. 14 report on statements by a “secret witness,” the Sabah daily accused Brunson of trying to divide Turkey with sermons praising FETO, as well as of doing illegal propaganda sympathetic to the banned Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), while dispensing humanitarian aid among Syrian

refugees.

In a longer article on Dec. 15, headlined "Arrested pastor exposed for both FETO and PKK sympathies," Yeni Asir newspaper claimed that intelligence reports indicated that Brunson was receiving a large monthly salary from a Gülen group in the US, and had reportedly praised the FETO movement, as well as the PKK, in a church leaders' meeting. The article specified that the pastor's involvement with Syrians coming from Suruc and Kobani, across the Turkish border, involved "missionary activities".

But until Turkish authorities release the confidential legal file against Rev. Brunson, it is unclear how much longer his incarceration and legal rights will remain unresolved. {eo}

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