

President Admits They're Holding Pastor Hostage as a Political Pawn

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has for the first time confirmed publicly that a U.S. pastor jailed in Turkey for the past 12 months is being held by his government as a political hostage.

In a speech at his presidential palace yesterday (Sept. 28), Erdoğan openly called on the United States to exchange Pastor Andrew Brunson for Muslim cleric Fethullah Gülen, a Turkish citizen living in exile in the U.S. since 1999, who is accused of masterminding last year's failed coup.

"[The U.S.] says, 'Give us the pastor back,'" Erdoğan said. "You have one pastor [of ours] as well. The pastor we have [Brunson] is on trial. Yours [Gülen] is not—he is living in Pennsylvania. Give him to us. You can easily give him to us. You can give him right away. Then we will try him [Brunson] and give him to you.'"

But Erdoğan's repeated demands to both the Obama and Trump administrations to extradite Gülen back to Turkey have not been successful.

Turkey has launched a massive internal crackdown over the past 15 months to identify and punish the FETO (Fethullah Terror Organization) network accused of infiltrating Turkey's armed forces and government. More than 50,000 "suspected" judges, prosecutors, soldiers, academics, journalists, human rights activists and police officers have been jailed, held for months in pre-trial detention.

Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan met up with his U.S. counterpart, Donald Trump, just last week at the 72nd United

Nations General Assembly in New York on Sept 21.

Since Oct. 7, 2016, Andrew Brunson has been one of these prisoners. He remains jailed without any written indictment explaining his alleged charges or providing any evidence against him. Judicial proceedings remain stalled, and his lawyer continues to be refused access to the sealed file of accusations against him.

First detained to be deported as a “threat to national security,” Brunson had lived in Turkey for 23 years, involved in legally recognized church-related ministries. Two months after his surprise detention in the port city of Izmir, where he led the small Izmir Resurrection Church, he was formally arrested on accusations of involvement in unspecified “terrorism” activities. The presiding judge at his Dec. 9, 2016 hearing referred verbally to allegations linking Brunson to the Gülen movement.

Vague reports then appeared in the pro-government Turkish media, reiterating claims that Brunson’s “terrorism” charges were related to his alleged membership in the Islamic cleric’s FETO network.

This past March, Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim denied that Brunson was being held as a political bargaining chip to obtain Gulen’s extradition, telling a visiting *USA Today* reporter that such an idea was “nonsensical. These matters are separate.”

Then as recently as Aug. 24, Brunson was informed that even more allegations had been filed against him in an Izmir court, charging him with spying to obtain secret political and military information to “overthrow the Turkish government” and undermine the country’s constitutional order.

Erdoğan continues to insist that “more than enough” evidence has been provided to the United States for a legal basis to extradite Gülen, apparently expecting President Trump to issue

an executive order to simply “trade” the controversial cleric for Brunson.

But under U.S. judicial procedures, extradition cases are decided by the federal court system, not the president or Congress. By contrast, under his new “state of emergency” decree issued on Aug. 25, President Erdoğan now has specific authority to arrange prisoner swaps to extradite foreigners jailed in Turkey.

The Turkish president is using this same decree to refuse to release German and other European citizens detained in Turkey in recent months on political allegations, demanding that their home countries first agree to extradite suspected Turkish FETO suspects applying for asylum abroad.

Erdoğan had declared in an August speech that the US must choose between Gülen and Turkey. “Sooner or later the U.S. will make a choice ... Either the coup-plotting terrorist FETO, or the democratic country Turkey. The [U.S.] has to make this choice.”

Hours after Erdoğan’s latest speech suggesting a swap of Gülen to free Brunson, spokeswoman Heather Nauert stated at a U.S. State Department briefing, “I can’t imagine that we would go down that road.”

“We have received extradition requests for him [Gülen],” she confirmed. “I have nothing new for you on that. We continue to call for Pastor Brunson’s release ... He was wrongfully imprisoned in Turkey.”

U.S. diplomatic officials last visited Brunson on Sept. 18 in the maximum-security prison where he is being held in Izmir. {eo}

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