

The Hidden Agenda Behind Pastor Andrew Brunson's Imprisonment

On the eve of the week-long Muslim festival of sacrifice, Eid al-Adha, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu has accused US President Donald Trump of not wanting to solve his country's disagreements with the United States over jailed US pastor Andrew Brunson.

"It seems that they do not want to solve these problems, that they are manipulating them for their domestic political concerns," Çavuşoğlu said.

The top Turkish diplomat referred to prominent media claims over the past week speculating that Trump's reasons for refusing diplomatic negotiations with Turkey to resolve the Protestant pastor's fate were political—specifically, to shore up electoral support among his "religious right" constituents before the US mid-term elections in November.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan also questioned Trump publicly on his demands for Brunson's immediate release, after the US leader doubled steel and aluminum tariffs against Turkey and threatened new sanctions until Brunson's release and return to the US.

The surprise US tariffs announced on 10 August sharply rocked the Turkish markets, pushing the lira to a record low of nearly 20 per cent in one day. Erdoğan called for a boycott of US electronic devices and then announced tariffs against US cars, alcohol, tobacco and other imports.

"You can never bring this nation in line with the language of threats," Erdoğan responded. "It is a pity that you choose a pastor over your strategic partner in NATO."

But yesterday a senior White House official blamed the breakdown in negotiations on Ankara, which allegedly continues to lobby behind the scenes to extract US concessions for Halkbank, a major Turkish state bank facing billions of dollars in US fines for violating Iran sanctions.

Quoted in *The Wall Street Journal*, the official said the US has informed Turkey that neither the Halkbank fines nor other areas of serious dispute between the two nations will be discussed until Brunson has been freed.

Tweets and Rejections

On Friday, U.S. President Donald Trump's latest tweet protested Turkey's continued jailing of Brunson, calling him a "patriot hostage".

"Turkey has taken advantage of the United States for many years," Trump wrote. "They are now holding our wonderful Christian pastor ... We will pay nothing for the release of an innocent man, but we are cutting back on Turkey!"

During a Cabinet meeting on the same day, U.S. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin promised further sanctions "ready to be put in place" if Brunson is not freed.

"We have more that we are planning to do if they don't release him quickly," said Mnuchin.

Hours later, Izmir's 3rd High Criminal Court formally rejected a pending appeal filed earlier in the week by Brunson's lawyer to lift his client's current house arrest detention and travel ban.

Removal of these two court-ordered restrictions against Brunson would assumedly expedite the pastor's return to the United States.

His lawyer Ismail Cem Halavurt's petition on Aug. 14 had requested the court to "prevent unlawful political

interventions by lifting judicial control provisions on the defendant”.

The appeal again stressed that the Izmir 2nd Criminal Court’s three trial hearings against Brunson to date had failed to present any concrete evidence of criminal activities by the pastor; instead the three-member judicial panel had accepted the validity of secret testimony as actual proof of his involvement in terrorism and espionage. If convicted, the prosecution demands a 35-year prison sentence.

Imprisoned since October 2016, Brunson was finally charged in March 2018 of links that allegedly revealed his sympathies for the illegal separatist Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK) and the Fethullah Gülen network accused by Ankara of orchestrating the failed July 2016 coup attempt against the Erdoğan government.

Halavurt told CNN that he planned to appeal again in 15 to 20 days, “thinking that there might be a new evidence in the file or there might be a new outcome of talks”. Noting other legal avenues, he said he would pursue appeals to the Constitutional Court, and if refused there then go on to the European Court of Human Rights.

The lawyer noted that the alleged “health reasons” for the Izmir higher court’s judicial transfer of Brunson to house arrest, as told to the Turkish media, were unfounded, describing this explanation as “a political invention”.

Europeans Urge Release

Diplomats in both Germany and the U.K. urged Turkey last week to resolve its contentious Brunson issue with the US by setting the pastor free.

“Deciding to release Brunson now would be the solution to resolve the current economic problems,” German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas told Deutsche Welle on Aug. 14, admitting that the Turkish lira’s record-low drop in value “causes us

great anxiety”.

The same day, U.K. Ambassador to the U.N. Karen Pierce stated: “The release of Brunson would alleviate the crisis between the two countries.”

“I think Turkey is a modern democracy. We hope that they will follow the rule of law. We had also in the past called for [Turkey’s] release of prisoners,” she observed.

“[Turkey] missed a big opportunity. This is very easy to resolve,” an unnamed US administration official told Reuters last week. “They made a big mistake trying to tie this to other things.”

Married with three children, the 50-year-old pastor had lived in Turkey for 23 years before his arrest. At the time of his arrest, he was leading a small congregation at the Resurrection Church in the Aegean port city of Izmir.

After being imprisoned for 22 months in several Turkish detention centers and prisons, Brunson was transferred to house arrest and reunited with his wife in his Izmir home on July 25, when his ankle was fitted with an electronic tracking device.

A fourth court hearing in his case has been scheduled for Oct. 12. {eo}

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