

# American Pastor Andrew Brunson still jailed in Turkey

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**EDITOR'S NOTE:** *On July 25, Turkey's Second High Penal Court in Izmir ordered Andrew Brunson transferred from prison to house arrest. He is prohibited from leaving the country. Kristina Arriaga, vice chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, who attended Brunson's July 18 hearing in Aliaga, Turkey, issued a statement: "It is good that Pastor Brunson will have some relief after being held in a Turkish prison for more than 600 days. But it is not enough. The Turkish government has deprived this innocent man of his due process rights and liberty for too long, and it must completely release him. If it fails to do so, the Trump Administration and the Congress should respond strongly and swiftly with targeted sanctions against the authorities responsible."*

ALIAGA, Turkey (BP)—American pastor Andrew Brunson's continued imprisonment in Turkey following a July 18 court hearing is probably an act of political maneuvering rather than Islamic persecution, two Islamic studies professors say.

Resurgent conservative Islam in Turkey is, however, part of the background, the professors say, that led to Brunson's October 2016 arrest and subsequent imprisonment over what religious liberty watchdogs have called unfounded charges of terrorism and espionage.

"I am not in a position to speculate on why Brunson (as opposed to other Americans, who are permitted to practice their Christianity freely in Turkey) was arrested," said Ant Greenham, associate professor of missions and Islamic studies at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. "False accusations seem to have played a role. However, Turkish President Tayyip

Erdogan is now in a position of greater strength, following the lifting of a state of emergency” July 18.

“So, without seeking to preempt the procedures of the Turkish judiciary, it is my hope that the president would use his good offices to effect Andrew Brunson’s release soon, pending a further hearing” Oct. 12, Greenham said.

Erodgan survived an attempted coup in 2016 and has since cracked down on thousands of alleged coup supporters. He has accused Islamist cleric Fethullah Gulen, who lives in Pennsylvania, of masterminding the coup. Brunson’s continued incarceration, Greenham said, is “linked to Washington’s refusal (for want of sufficient evidence) to extradite Gulen.”

## **‘I forgive those who testified against me’**

During the hearing for Brunson, former members of the Presbyterian church he pastored for six years in Izmir “made vague, unsubstantiated” accusations against him for nearly two hours, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom reported. When the judge asked Brunson, 50, to reply, he said, “My faith teaches me to forgive, so I forgive those who testified against me.”

Speaking in Turkish, Brunson told the court, “It is really hard to stay in jail and be separated from my wife and children,” according to Reuters. He added: “There is no concrete evidence against me. The disciples of Jesus suffered in his name. Now it is my turn. I am an innocent man on all these charges. I reject them. I know why I am here. I am here to suffer in Jesus’ name.”

The judge ordered Brunson, who has lived in Turkey since 1993, to remain

in prison until a fourth court hearing Oct. 12. If convicted, he could face up to 35 years in jail.

Bill Campbell, a North Carolina pastor who attended the hearing, told World Watch Monitor: "As usual, there was much spurious testimony against Andrew. Andrew's testimony was absolutely powerful. He presented the gospel with confidence and defended himself with boldness. The court allowed for the first time a favorable witness, and one who was to speak against him actually spoke in Andrew's favor. It felt like they had decided the outcome before the trial."

Greenham said he doesn't believe "Islam (or Islamic theology) is the primary factor in Andrew Brunson's continued imprisonment."

## **Using imprisoned pastor as leverage**

Ayman Ibrahim, an Islamic studies professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, agreed Erdogan seems to be leveraging Brunson in an attempt to secure U.S. extradition of Gulen.

Ibrahim added the "background of ... Turkey's religious and political scene" is Erdogan's reassertion of conservative Islam in Turkish politics, where "conservatives have often been on the loser side" since the 1950s.

"Muslim conservatives undoubtedly believe and support him, as they seek to restore the glorious days of Islam and, of course, the strong 'Muslim' empire," Ibrahim said in written comments. "This is remarkably evidenced by the support he has been giving to Muslim Brotherhood members and to the political regime at Qatar.

"Erdogan relentlessly encourages and advances rhetoric of Islam's hegemony to ensure his political base is secured. In my estimation, his use of religious claims is only a tool to secure his strong political fist. He is

significantly supported in his endeavor by his unprecedented control of the news media.”

## **‘Miscarriage of justice’**

U.S. President Donald Trump, members of his administration and members of Congress all have urged Turkey to release Brunson.

Trump tweeted July 18 that Brunson’s imprisonment is a “total disgrace” and Erdogan “should do something to free this wonderful Christian husband & father.” Brunson has, Trump said, “been held hostage far too long.”

USCIRF Vice Chair Kristina Arriaga said: “The government of Turkey continues to make a mockery of justice in its treatment of Pastor Brunson. Today I was hoping to see the judge order his complete release and put an end to the miscarriage of justice that Pastor Brunson’s entire case represents. Turkish authorities still have not provided one good reason for depriving Pastor Brunson of his liberties. The Trump Administration and the Congress should continue to apply pressure, including using targeted sanctions against officials connected to this case, until Pastor Brunson is released.”