

Today's Martyrs – Andrew and Norine Brunson



Andrew and Norine Brunson – World Watch Monitor

Pastor Andrew Brunson and his wife Norine were missionaries with 23 years of ministry experience in the Turkish city of Izmir when they were arrested on October 7, 2016 on undisclosed national security charges. They were initially told that they would be deported. This was believable: a number of Western Christian missionaries and historical researchers had been deported or denied re-entry to the country following the failed July 15, 2016 military coup d'état against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Norine was released on October 19, but time dragged on. Andrew's attorney

was denied access to him or to the supposed 'classified' evidence under which he was arrested. He was denied a court hearing, allegedly due to the shortage of judges created by the mass arrests following the coup attempt.

The reasons for the arrest of Andrew Brunson have nothing to do with his actions as pastor or evangelist. Rather, they are embedded in the events of Turkish society and politics in the past century.

The creation of modern Turkey following World War One was based on a number of principles, including secularism and a military which would stand as an extra-constitutional guard against the return of Islam as a political force. The military toppled governments in 1960, 1971, 1980, and 1997. It attempted to stop the re-election of the pro-Islamist AKP party in 2007, but failed. While AKP co-founder Erdogan was a divisive figure, the AKP grew in popularity in part due to its alliance with the former Sufi cleric Fethullah Gulen.

Muhammed Fethullah Gulen is the real reason why Andrew Brunson had been imprisoned. Gulen is a multi-millionaire who has led a politico-religious movement based on the teachings of Saud Nursi, an Islamic cleric who attempted to reconcile Islam with modern science and capitalism before his death in 1960. Gulen's teachings have proven to be very popular in Turkey, and have even been implemented in the United States due to Gulen's major involvement in the charter school movement. Gulen fled to the U.S. in 1999 rather than face charges that he violated laws protecting secularism. Reportedly he lives in a James Bond-like compound atop one of the Pocono Mountains in Pennsylvania, protected by helicopters and submachine-toting guards. Yet he has always co-operated with and appeared before U.S. officials when asked to do so.

So Erdogan and Gulen were allies in the rise of the AKP to political power, but in 2013 they split over corruption allegations against Erdogan supporters. The Turkish government then declared Gulen's movement a terrorist organization and requested his extradition back to Turkey; the U.S. government refused. Erdogan began a purge of Gulen supporters in the schools, judiciary, and military; he even went so far as to temporarily jail a medical doctor who had posted on Facebook photos of Erdogan alongside similar photos of Gollum from

the *Lord of the Rings* movies! It was these crackdowns on democratic freedoms that triggered the attempted 2016 coup.

After the coup failed over 40,000 alleged Gulen supporters were arrested or dismissed from their positions. In NATO headquarters in Brussels Turkish officers requested asylum rather than obey orders to return home. The AKP media attempted to implicate Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of the Eastern Orthodox Church in the coup, despite his public opposition to the coup and his absence from the country at the time. The Turkish government then demanded Gulen's extradition as an alleged coup plotter, and the U.S. continued to refuse, citing the fact that no evidence of a crime was given that could be presented to a U.S. extradition hearing. Andrew and Norine Brunson were arrested after only three months' of this diplomatic bickering. In a March 16, 2017 press conference Prime Minister Binaku Yildirim said that Brunson's trial would be 'accelerated' and referred to both the Brunson and Gulen cases in almost the same breath, but denied the cases were linked.

The Brunsons may have been targeted primarily as Americans, but they certainly would not have been targeted had they been American Muslims. Christians have long been used as scapegoats in Turkey, but there are not many left for such use. A century ago Christians comprised up to 27% of the Turkish population, but after the 1914-22 genocides of the Armenians, Assyrians, and Pontic Greeks and the 1955 Septemvriana pogrom the Christian population dropped to its present level of 0.3%. Ironically the location of the Brunson's ministry, Izmir [aka Smyrna], was the scene of the last major massacre of Armenian and Greek Christians in 1922; Christian deaths at that time and place totaled over 100,000, and many more became refugees.

To this date the Turkish government has refused to recognize the genocides. While still Prime Minister Erdogan ordered the destruction in 2011 of a massive statue near the Armenian border titled the Monument to Humanity, which was a first attempt by some Turks to memorialize and express regret over the genocides. In 2009 Erdogan said "it's not possible for a Muslim to commit genocide". Such actions only serve to cement ignorance and triumphalism, which will only hinder Turkish citizens from seeing future atrocities as such should they happen. It would seem that nothing changes but the victims. Pray, pray, please pray...

Postscript: Prayers were answered! On October 12, 2018, after the U.S. government imposed sanctions on Turkey, Pastor Andrew Brunson was convicted, sentenced to 3 years' imprisonment, released with time served, reunited with Norine, and left the country. Among his parting words were "I love Jesus, and I love Turkey".

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