



U.S.-Turkish Relations In A Tailspin

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It's official: U.S.-Turkish relations are in a tailspin.

The once-robust ties between Washington and Ankara have frayed considerably in recent years, riven by strategic issues like Turkey's growing strategic proximity to Russia and its cozy relationship with Islamist actors, as well as its increasingly conspiratorial, anti-American political discourse. But what may end up causing a lasting rupture between the two Cold War-era allies is an altogether different — and unexpected — issue: The fate of an American pastor named Andrew Brunson.

Over the past two years, Pastor Brunson has emerged as perhaps the highest-profile foreign-born victim of Turkey's Islamist-leaning Justice and Development Party and its larger-than-life leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The spiritual leader of an evangelical church in Turkey's Izmir region, Pastor Brunson, a North Carolinian, was swept up in the widespread government crackdown that followed the failed June 2016 coup to unseat Erdogan. He has now languished in Turkish detention for close to eighteen months, formally accused of everything from membership in a terrorist organization to espionage against the Turkish state.

Pastor Brunson's ongoing incarceration, and the lack of credible evidence against him, has made his case something of a cause celebre, with numerous human rights groups and civil rights activists urging his release. For its part, Turkey's government has flirted with what some have called "hostage diplomacy" — using Pastor Brunson as a bargaining chip in its efforts to secure the extradition of the controversial cleric Fethullah Gulen, who resides in the Poconos and whom Mr. Erdogan has accused of orchestrating the 2016 coup attempt against him.

Yet it wasn't until the Trump administration took up Pastor Brunson's cause that it truly became an international flashpoint. Back in April, Mr. Trump weighed in personally via Twitter, decrying the pastor's persecution and urging Turkish authorities to release him. When that failed to elicit results, President Trump again took to social media last month with a more strident message, warning the Turkish government that he was prepared to impose "large sanctions" if the pastor's case wasn't closed promptly.

Turkey's government, however, was quick to dismiss the demand, likely believing the threat to simply be bluster on the part of the United States.

It wasn't. On Aug. 1, the U.S. Treasury Department formally leveled sanctions against two high-ranking Turkish officials — Justice Minister Abdulhamit Gul and Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu — for their role in Pastor Brunson's ongoing detention. The reason given by the Trump administration was that Mr. Gul and Mr. Soylu "serve as leaders of Turkish government organizations responsible for implementing Turkey's serious human rights abuses." (Ankara has since vowed retaliation against the United States, threatening to level an "equivalent response" to the new U.S. penalties.)

The unfolding drama bodes ill for bilateral relations between the U.S. and Turkey, which are already fraying under the weight of widespread worries in Washington over Turkey's ideological direction and geopolitical orientation. Those fears caused the Senate to recently pass an amendment prohibiting the sale of advanced F-35 fighter jets to Turkey. Now, the relationship is poised to get even worse, as Washington actively pushes back against Ankara on human rights.

Even more significantly, however, the widening U.S.-Turkish rift could lead to a fundamental rupture in the Western world's most important strategic partnership. There is already widespread concern among the member nations of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) regarding America's long-term commitment to European security — concerns that have been fanned by Mr. Trump's combative turn at the most recent NATO summit in Brussels, and by his persistent efforts to mend political fences with Vladimir Putin's Russia. Now these worries have been compounded by the very real possibility that Washington and Ankara, which have been drifting apart for years, might be on the brink of an unbridgeable divide.

Whether they are or not depends greatly on what the Turkish government does next, and how America responds to it. What is already clear, however, is that the fate of a humble pastor has become a bellwether for the future of the U.S.-Turkish relationship — and maybe even of larger NATO solidarity.

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