

“Prisoners of the Purge: The Victims of Turkey’s Failing Rule of Law”

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

Rep. Chris Smith, Co-Chairman

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Good morning. We will hear today about the catastrophic breakdown of the rule of law in our NATO ally Turkey and its personal consequences for several American citizens and thousands of Turks.

A key matter before us today is the Turkish Government’s apparent decision to hold hostage an innocent American pastor in order to extort political concessions from the United States. This “hostage diplomacy,” as it has been called, is unacceptable when it is practiced by our enemies and appalling from our supposed allies.

Pastor Andrew Brunson was detained over a year ago on October 7, 2016. We know from Pastor Brunson’s U.S. attorney, CeCe Heil that the Turkish government prepared an order of deportation on the day of his detention. The Turkish government could have easily expelled him from the country then and there, bringing to an unjust close his 23 years of peaceful work in Turkey but sparing him indefinite detention. And yet it chose not to. Why was this order of deportation never executed?

Pastor Brunson’s daughter, Jacqueline, will testify that prior to her father’s detention the “worst case scenario for Christian pastors who were not nationals in Turkey was deportation.” Again, why was Pastor Brunson not deported consistent with this precedent?

In February, I joined 77 of my colleagues from the House and Senate in writing to Turkish President Erdogan urging him to release and then promptly

deport Pastor Brunson. Nine months have passed without any response to that letter.

In the past 13 months that Pastor Brunson has spent in jail in Turkey, the President of the United States, the Vice President, and the Secretary of State, among many others, have interceded with the Turkish government seeking his release. And yet to this day, he languishes in a punishing legal limbo without trial and without access to the evidence against him.

On September 28, President Erdogan publicly suggested trading US-based Islamic cleric Fethullah Gulen for Pastor Brunson. Rhetorically addressing the United States, Erdogan declared in reference to Gulen “you have one pastor as well. Give him to us, then we will try him [Pastor Brunson] and give him to you.”

With this statement, all doubt was removed as to why Turkey has failed to release Pastor Brunson for more than a year. Turkey is holding an American citizen hostage for a deal the United States will never accept.

Sadly, this is not President Erdogan’s only outrage against an American citizen. In May, during an official visit to the United States, Erdogan’s personal security detail—or, more appropriately, his goon squad—viciously attacked a group of peaceful protesters in broad daylight outside the Turkish Ambassador’s residence in Washington, D.C. In the melee, 26-year-old Ceren Borazan from my home state of New Jersey was thrown to the ground, punched, kicked, and held in a chokehold by a Turkish bodyguard who threatened her life. Video footage shows President Erdogan calmly looking on at the brazen violence. Even as 15 of his bodyguards have been charged in the US for the assault and the United States has cancelled handgun and ammunition sales to his security detail, President Erdogan has never apologized.

I believe that we should examine the applicability of individual sanctions against grave human rights abusers in Turkey under the provisions of the International Religious Freedom Act and the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act. These existing sanctions regimes, or a new tailored set, should be used to hold to account those responsible for the detention of Pastor Brunson and other cases of prolonged and unjustified detention in Turkey.

Thank you to our witnesses for their presence here and in particular to Pastor Brunson's daughter for her courage and candor in testifying today before the Commission.