

Pastor Brunson's Deed of Derring-Do

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Pastor Andrew Brunson has now been released from house arrest in Turkey and returned to the United States, but the lessons of his captivity should not be forgotten.

In the long saga of Recep Tayyip Erdogan's refusal to release Brunson, the pastor was held for months in a single cell along with 17 Muslim prisoners accused, as he was initially, of "Gülenism." Then he was placed under house arrest. The sheer craziness of Turkey's polity under Erdogan was on display as never before in the Brunson case. In the vast dragnet Erdogan ordered in Turkey after the attempted coup of mid-July 2016, his government detained more than 100,000 Turks, and arrested almost 50,000 of them, accused of being followers of Fethulleh Gülen. In October 2016, Brunson, a pastor of the Presbyterian Evangelical Church, who had lived in Turkey for 23 years, ministering quietly to a church of 25 congregants, was

arrested for being a “terrorist” – the terrorists in question apparently being the Gülenists.

Among the absurdities offered into evidence by the prosecution, court documents claimed that a photo of *maqluba*, a popular Levantine rice dish, was found on Brunson’s phone, sent to him by his daughter. The court documents describe *maqluba* as a “Gülenist delicacy.” Brunson was in one charge accused of having attended a Gülenist event. In another, it was claimed that he spoke positively once about relations between Christians and the Gülenist movement. Brunson was charged with “membership in an armed terrorist organization,” “gathering state secrets for espionage, attempting to overthrow the Turkish parliament and government, and to change the constitutional order.” But even that was not enough. He was accused not just of being a Gülenist – that iPhone picture of *maqluba* being a dead giveaway – but also accused of being a collaborator with armed Kurdish groups, of visiting the YPG (a Kurdish militia group that Erdogan describes as “terrorist”) territory in Syria, and of wanting to Christianize Kurdistan and have it become a Christian state.

And even that was not all. Pastor Brunson was also accused in the indictment of being a “high-level member of the Gülen movement” as well as an American spy, positioned to become CIA chief in Turkey had the 2016 coup attempt succeeded. It was alleged that Brunson fended off an assassination attempt thanks to his intelligence agency training, and there was speculation in the press that the CIA would assassinate Brunson in prison if it thought he would not be deported back to the U.S. For he knew too many secrets.

All of these charges were both idiotic and fantastical. Pastor Brunson was exactly what he seemed to be: a dedicated Christian, who had tended his tiny flock of 25 congregants for more than 20 years, and had never visited, much less plotted with, Kurds in Syria, had never attended a single Gülenist meeting, and had no plans either to take over and balkanize

Turkey, nor to “Christianize Kurdistan.”

Another absurdity came in an article by one Mehmet Erdogan, a deputy from the ruling party, who accused Brunson of having served in the American military in Iraq, where he was, as a Marine, in charge of stealing gold bullion from the Iraqis worth hundreds of billions. The proof? A photograph of an American soldier, supposedly looking like Pastor Brunson, with the military name-tag of “Brownm” holding up what was described as a “gold bar.”

In truth, the soldier in question did not look anything like Andrew Brunson, except in his crew-cut. The name “Brown” may, to a Turk or Arab, seem similar to “Brunson” (BRN-BRN), but not to anyone else. And the “gold bar” being held up could not possibly have been of gold, because if it were, it would weigh 300 pounds. The “gold bar” in question was not the right size for conventional gold bars. It was, in fact, part of a cache found in a truck in Iraq in 2003 that had originally been estimated to be worth \$500 million. According to a Reuters report from August 1, 2003, later testing of the more than 1,000 bars that were found revealed they were not gold, but mostly copper and zinc. Experts said they were melted-down shell casings. And the true content of the bars was made in a report to Congress about the reconstruction effort.

And one other thing. There was no record – the Turks knew this perfectly – of Pastor Brunson being in Iraq in 2003 or, indeed, at any other time. For 23 years, he had been living unprepossessingly in Turkey, and his real deed of derring-do had nothing to do with Gülenism, being a top C.I.A. agent, plotting to create a Christianized and independent Kurdistan, or stealing hundreds of millions of dollars worth of gold bars from Iraq. That real deed of derring-do was, rather, his steady determination to pursue his quiet vocation of spreading the Gospel as a pastor of the Presbyterian Evangelical Church in Izmir, ministering to 25 congregants. In today’s Turkey, that was an act of authentic bravery.

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