

# ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

## **Can the U.S.-Turkish alliance survive Sultan Erdogan's misrule?**

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An important part of international diplomacy is making the outrageous palatable. Pretense is a diplomatic virtue.

Not for Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, a sultan wannabe who has accumulated increasingly dictatorial powers. He frankly admitted holding an American as a human chit to trade for someone wanted by his government.

The U.S. "says, 'Give us the pastor back,'" said Erdogan, "You have one pastor" of ours. "Give him to us. You can easily give him to us. You can give him right away. Then we will try [American Andrew Brunson] and give him to you."

When his party first won election in 2002 former Istanbul Mayor Erdogan was a liberator. He helped dismantle the authoritarian-nationalist state created by Turkey's founder Mustafa Kemal Ataturk.

However, a few years ago Erdogan and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) shifted course. As charges of corruption mushroomed his government became more authoritarian and Islamist.

Erdogan's rise was aided by Fethullah Gulen, a Muslim cleric living in the U.S. who built a global religious and social movement ("Hizmet"). Two decades ago Gulen received political asylum when authoritarian secularists dominated Turkish politics. In 2013 the politician and preacher turned on each other.

The AKP also shrunk the space for other critics. The regime seized independent media organizations, arrested journalists, and intimidated critics. The increasingly brutal assault against the Kurds turned communities into war zones.

The latest State Department human rights report cited "arbitrary deprivation of life and other unlawful or politically motivated killings," "inconsistent access to due process," "government interference with freedom of expression," and "an atmosphere of fear that further limited judicial independence."

Erdogan's relationship with U.S. and Western leaders deteriorated even further after the failed July 2016 coup. The Turkish president used the attempted putsch as an opportunity to crush all opposition. Any criticism was treated as veritable treason.

Even before the takeover attempt collapsed he contended that it had been masterminded by his former ally Gulen. Erdogan then sought to destroy the Hizmet movement. Ankara initiated a

massive, Stalinist purge of anyone with the slightest connection to the movement, including opening an account at a bank owned by supposed Gulenists.

Some 170,000 people have been subject to various legal proceedings, more than 150,000 have been fired or suspended, and over 50,000 have been arrested. Every week additional arrests and dismissals are announced.

Targets include parliamentarians, judges, prosecutors, professors, teachers, and journalists. Evidence of wrongdoing is irrelevant. Explained Human Rights Watch: “The crackdown that followed the coup attempt was symptomatic of the government’s increasing authoritarianism.”

The Erdogan government also targeted Washington, stoking popular conspiracy theories that the U.S. was behind the coup. Ankara also sharply criticized the U.S. government for failing to extradite Gulen.

Although the Turkish government insisted on his guilt, it has provided little evidence. Western intelligence agencies saw no evidence that the 76-old imam masterminded the coup.

Hence Erdogan’s offer to trade Brunson, an American pastor who has lived in Turkey for 23 years, for Gulen. Brunson was arrested last fall and charged for “terrorism.” Ankara arrested several other Americans on equally dubious charges, including a chemistry professor, NASA scientist, and real estate agent.

Further damaging relations was the assault by Erdogan’s security personnel on peaceful demonstrators outside of the Turkish embassy during his recent visit. Moreover, the U.S. arrested Turkish-Iranian gold trader Reza Zarrah, charging him with breaching sanctions against Iran. He is thought to know details of high-level corruption in Ankara.

Turkey arrested U.S. embassy employees — Turkish citizens — in February and early October. In retaliation, the U.S. embassy recently announced that it was halting the processing of visas to America. Turkey then responded in kind.

For years Washington has given Erdogan the benefit of the doubt despite increasing authoritarianism at home and radicalism abroad. But Erdogan is no friend of America. Moreover, after the end of the Cold War, broad geopolitical interests no longer hold the two states together.

Still, Washington values its access to Incirlik Air Base. The facility is convenient, but not essential: retired general Chuck Wald, once a top military commander in Europe, said “It’s a good place to have a base, but can we do it somewhere else? Absolutely.” Germany already has moved its forces from Incirlik to Jordan’s al-Asrak airbase.

The Erdogan presidency is a great tragedy, especially for Turks. But he also has destroyed the pretense that Ankara and Washington are allies. The Trump administration now must defend America’s interests and values from Turkey.

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