

U.S.-Turkish Relations in the Era of Erdogan's "Hostage Diplomacy"  
*A Conversation with Amb. Eric Edelman, Dr. Aykan Erdemir, and Dr. Lisel Hintz,  
moderated by Dion Nissenbaum, with opening remarks by Clifford D. May*

MAY: Well, good afternoon, and welcome everyone to the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. I'm Cliff May. I'm FDD's founder and president. I'm also proud to serve as a commissioner on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and it's with both those hats on that I'm pleased to open today's conversation: U.S.-Turkish Relations in the Era of Erdogan's "Hostage Diplomacy."

Earlier this month, almost a year to the day, after American pastor Andrew Brunson was detained, two of my fellow USCIRF commissioners, Sandra Jolley and Kristina Arriaga, were able to visit him in Kiriklar Prison in Izmir, Turkey.

While they were there, they learned that Pastor Brunson was initially confined to a cell meant to accommodate eight men, but was instead crowded with 21 prisoners. He has since been moved to Kiriklar Prison where he is confined 24 hours a day to a cell with two others accused of being members of the Gulen movement. Suffering from the effects of stress, which he has endured, he's lost over 50 pounds. Kristina and Sandy said he seemed rather frail and a bit disoriented. Pastor Brunson as I think most of you know spent 20 years ministering to Christians in Turkey.

He's been accused of trying to overthrow the Turkish government and its constitution; charges which he says are completely false. And I am convinced they are, but if convicted, Pastor Brunson could be sentenced to life in prison.

He has few people to speak with. No fellow Christians whatsoever other than his wife who comes to visit weekly. He told Commissioners Arriaga and Jolley that he has never felt so alone in his life. He's deeply concerned that the outside world will believe the charges that have been fabricated against him. He is worried that he'll be forgotten. I join my fellow commissioners in calling for his immediate release by the Turkish government.

And unfortunately, Pastor Brunson is just one example. A growing number of western nationals have been imprisoned in Turkey since the 2016 coup attempt, raising serious concerns over Turkish President Erdogan's "hostage diplomacy," using western nationals as bargaining chips to extract concessions from NATO allies. This really should be unacceptable.

I'm pleased that we have a panel of experts to discuss these important issues today. I'm going to hand the conversation over to today's moderator, Dion Nissenbaum, who is national security reporter for *The Wall Street Journal* and who himself was detained briefly in Turkey.

Before I do so, by way of housekeeping, I should know today's event will be—is being live streamed. I encourage guests here and online to join in today's conversation on Twitter: we're @FDD. I'd also ask that you please silence our cellphones, with that, Dion, thank you and over to you.

NISSENBAUM: Thank you, Cliff. Thank you to FDD for having this panel. It's an interesting topic, always. Talking about Turkey is engaging and interesting. And I'll try and get to questions quickly, so that we can bring in the audience as well.

As some of you may know, I was detained. I was based in Turkey until December. Shortly after Christmas, three plainclothes police officers turned up at my apartment door in Turkey. My wife and infant daughter were there.

They told me I was being deported. The reason seemed to be that something that I had retweeted related to two Turkish soldiers that had been held by ISIS and were burned alive, which the Turkish government until very recently had denied had happened.

I thought I'd be put on a plane, sent back to New York and that would be the end of it. Instead, I was taken to a detention center in the middle of nowhere, thrown in solitary in a basement. Told I was being held under the state of emergency and I could be held there essentially as long as they wanted without talking to my wife or an attorney or consular officials.

And it was during those three days that I had time to think about this issue and worried because I was being held at the end of the Obama administration and before the new administration was taking over, that I would become a bargaining chip of some sort. That I would be held until the new president came in and I would be released as a goodwill gesture. And I feel especially thankful in light of what we've seen in the subsequent months that I was not one of these bargaining chips and that I was able to get out with some quiet diplomacy thanks to the U.S. government and some other people, in fact, in the Turkish government who helped me.

So let's jump off from there. I'm going to introduce the panelists. And then we'll get into some questions and then we'll bring you in.

To the far right is Dr. Aykan Erdemir who until 2015 served in parliament with—in Turkey. He's a senior fellow here at FDD and a very prolific writer about Turkey as I'm sure you all know.

Sitting next to him is Dr. Lisel Hintz, an associate professor of International Relations and European Studies at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies. She's a specialist in the intersection of identity politics and foreign policy with a focus on Turkey. She was there for the anniversary of the coup and has a book coming out maybe next year, so keep an eye out for that.

And then to my immediate right, of course is Ambassador Eric Edelman, who served as the Ambassador of Turkey at the beginning of the Erdogan era. He's also served as the Undersecretary of Defense Policy and a deputy assistant to the vice president for National Security Affairs.

Aykan, let's start with you. Just take us through the scope of the problem here. Tell us when you think this so-called hostage diplomacy started, how many people are we talking about and what is Erdogan's goal here?

ERDEMIR: Yes. As our guests have already seen, we have used the quotes set on the term “hostage diplomacy” and I know that there is at least panelist who might want to discuss the term as well.

So in preparing for the panel, I went over all the stuff that we have written and kind of commented on. And I have traced the evolution of our own thinking at FDD and particularly my own thinking on the issue.

Immediately after the coup, I started using the term “scapegoats.” And back then, this was mostly an issue of crackdown on religious minorities in Turkey: Turkish nationals and foreign nationals, and mainly Jews and Christians, and later more specifically Protestants because in the Turkish conspiratorial mind, Protestantism is seen as the fifth column of U.S. imperialism.

But then we could see that things were evolving beyond a crackdown on minorities and then I see myself using the term “bargaining chip” in my own writing. And we were beginning to suspect that the increasing number of foreign nationals, U.S., Germany, Netherlands, the U.K., France, and a number of other countries, the increasing number of foreign nationals, we were beginning to suspect were bargaining chips. And then I see myself beginning to use alongside some other analysts to use—beginning to use the word “hostage.”

It's a pretty heavy word. And it's a pretty serious accusation. But I think we have all been redeemed by no one other than President Erdogan, because in July this year, as the German Daily Bild reported, Turkey made the first swap offer to the German government, to exchange Germany journalist Deniz Yucel for two asylum-seeking generals.

And then this September, Erdogan said, “Give me the priest; I'll give you the priest.” What he means is give me Fethullah Gulen, the alleged mastermind of the coup and I'll give you the U.S. pastor, Andrew Brunson.

Now, when we take a look at this playing field, first of all, maybe and Lisel might want to further complicate the term “hostage,” I would like to argue that this was not a well-planned hostage diplomacy right from the very start.

You can see that this is a very haphazard kind of makeshift policy in the making. And Erdogan at this point is both the hostage taker as well as the hostage. What do I mean by it? I mean Erdogan has been taken hostage by the crazy conspiracy theories that he, his inner circle and pro-government media have been pushing.

And it's like a vicious circle because then the media picks up on the official comments and it becomes kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy. So at this point, I think Erdogan is a firm believer in the kind of conspiracies he has constructed around these western nationals.

And so, he has taken himself hostage in a way that it's very difficult for him to break out of this thinking, that all these western nationals are spies, coup plotters, PKK members, members of the Gulenist terrorist organization and so on and so forth.

So, I think—so to make a long story short in one sentence, what initially began as an attempt to intimidate and scapegoat religious minorities and then western nationals gradually developed into a “hostage diplomacy” which then took Erdogan hostage and he is stuck there.

NISSENBAUM: Now, Eric, the idea that the U.S. might bargain for something like this seems fantastical on its face, but we have seen with this administration, in fact, that they are looking to get Americans out of places like Egypt. We've heard that they tried to negotiate with Syria for the release of this journalist Austin Tice.

So, President Erdogan looking at this new administration might in fact think that there is an opening here, that there is some room for negotiation. Do you think that the President Erdogan has some ears here in Washington that might be willing to consider an idea of some sort of swap?

EDELMAN: Well, we actually know that that's happening because in connection with the Reza Zarrab case.

NISSENBAUM: Just explain.

EDELMAN: Reza Zarrab who is Turkish-Iranian dual national, who was a part initially of the corruption case that blew apart the AKP-Gulen alliance in December of 2013, has been indicted in the Southern District of New York for evading U.S. sanctions on Iran.

And I think that he is someone who the Erdogan government and Erdogan personally is deeply fearful of for what he might say in court and what might happen if he is convicted in court.

And we know that Zarrab has retained extremely powerful and well-connected lobbyists to this administration who have been lobbying the administration to have the charges against Zarrab dismissed. They've met with Erdogan personally in Ankara.

And it was in that context that my colleague here at FDD and I, Merve Tahiroglu who is sitting back there, trying to be inconspicuous. But she and I wrote an op-ed in the Post in July raising the possibility that in the light of the German swaps that there might be one in the offing for Zarrab. Or this might be promoted by Zarrab's lobbyists, by the way, these lobbyists who were both attorneys themselves, one a former U.S. attorney for the Southern District of New York as well as a political office holder have filed in court that they have no intention of pleading before the court for Zarrab.

Their only representation of Zarrab essentially is to lobby for him to be freed. So, I think there is every reason to believe that this was something that Erdogan has had in his mind for some time.

Well, where did he get the idea? I think Aykan has framed this very nicely. But I think Erdogan is not alone among world leaders trying to understand our current president and this is a president who is atypical to say the least by U.S. political standards.

But I don't think it takes anybody with a PhD to be able figure out that he is susceptible to gestures like this. Obviously, the release of Aya Hijazi in connection with President el-Sisi of Egypt's meeting with President Trump made it clear that you could use people who had been detained for transparently political purposes for the political purpose of flattering President Trump. And I think President Erdogan and his entourage were quick to pick up on that and I think that's why we find ourselves where we do.

NISSENBAUM: And we'll come back to that a little bit more as we get into the conversation, but let's just jump over to Europe real quick and talk about, Europeans also have quite a few citizens in custody—Turkish, German, dual nationals, creates more complication. There were two French journalists that were recently freed. There's a lot of questions whirling around whether there was any deal cut.

HINTZ: Right.

NISSENBAUM: What is your sense about European nations and their reaction to this? Sometimes, I know from my own experiences in places like Syria, European nations are more willing to pay ransoms to extremist groups to get their people out.

HINTZ: Right.

Is there any kind of rift developing between the U.S. and Europe over how to respond to this? Or is there a united response? Are there any nations that are thinking about making trades like this?

HINTZ: So I think the European dimension is a really interesting one. And I think until we understand actually what happens behind closed doors and how these individuals are being released and what strategies are being put forward and are being considered as acceptable, we won't know if one side is trying to follow the other or if they're united or if there is a rift.

I mean I think the European dimension, particularly with German and the Netherlands are the two countries that have had the most animosity in the relationship with Turkey. Over the issue of arrested citizens, dual nationals, and then, sort of, from the Turkish perspective, the fact that it accuses Germany, for example, of harboring generals or military members who have taken refuge there and sought asylum following the coup attempt.

But there is a larger dimension to this, which I think goes beyond hostage diplomacy. And I very much agree with Aykan's position that this began as kind of an ad hoc haphazard

taking of individuals that then may have had the potential to develop into something of a larger strategy, such that we can think of “hostage diplomacy” as an actual strategy.

If you know, from following Turkish foreign policy, it's often hard to discern precisely what strategy Erdogan—and I say Erdogan not the AKP and not the Foreign Ministry, but Erdogan himself—in terms of what kind of strategy he's trying to pursue.

And so I think the dimensions again go past just the negotiating in terms of hostages, but rather particularly in the European case, but now we're seeing it in the U.S. as well, of how Erdogan can kind of swipe back at his opponents in the international arena by taking individuals into custody on his own territory.

And one of the dimensions I think that's important to recognize is when the U.S. pushes back or when EU nations push back, that actually fuels his anti-western rhetoric that gains him nationalist support back home. And this is really important to look at the domestic foreign policy connections, particularly in this case because Erdogan is not solely focused, but laser-focused on winning in the 2019 elections.

And those are going to be municipal and general and presidential. And when we see—when we look at what happened with the referendum in April, he barely wins by the skin of his teeth, has to use a whole lot of electoral manipulation in order to do so, unprecedented in the Turkish context, by the way.

And so he feels the threat. And I think he sees the best way to consolidate support is by trying to steal votes from nationalist voters, trying to steal votes from the Nationalist Action Party, which is sort of in tatters already. We've seen splits. Meral Aksener started her own party. We've seen Deniz Bahceli who is the—sorry, Devlet Bahceli who is the chair of the party is aging. People don't necessarily believe in him anymore.

So this is kind of prime targets for stealing voters and bringing them over to the AKP side. And the best way that he can do that, and we see a bump in the polls every time there is some sort of anti-western push that Erdogan can put forward.

We saw this at Davos in 2009 when Erdogan calls Shimon Peres when he lashes out at him and says, "You know how to kill. You are killing Gazans, how dare you?" And he comes home to a swell of nationalist support.

So I can see that there is a “hostage diplomacy” element and I think Aykan has been a premier person in pointing out this and tracing the chronology of what's actually happening. But I don't think it was a “hostage diplomacy” strategy from the beginning. And I do think it has a much wider context, particularly in Europe with the EU leaders, particularly in their own elections when they also want to win nationalist support are saying things like, “we should stop the accession process for Turkey.”

NISSENBAUM: So do you think that Erdogan doesn't really believe that he can make these kind of swaps and that it is purely for domestic or?

HINTZ: So there is a double side there because Erdogan more than most leaders I know—well I guess that's changing, depending on who is becoming elected—but really does not like to look powerless.

He resents and despises any time that he looks like he can't get what he wants and we see him make enemies of those who believes are making him look bad. And Bashar al-Assad is a great example of this, when in August of 2011, Erdogan gives up his attempts to use his political capital and, frankly, his friendly close relationship with the Syrian president and he turns on him in a second and all of a sudden he's a dictator and he has to go.

And I think a lot of it was because he lost face in the negotiations. He promised the international community, "I got this one. I'm going to take care of this guy." And he couldn't come through with it.

So Davos, what leads up to Davos is Turkey trying to broker Israel-Syria negotiations. There is a delegation of Israel in Ankara. And several days later, Israel starts bombing Gaza again. And Erdogan looks like a fool because he can't control Israel.

So I think that he doesn't like the idea that he's not getting what he wants. That he sent several delegations to the U.S. in particular, not only on the Gulen case, the extradition request, but also on the U.S.'s arming of the YPG and support for Syrian Kurds in the fight against ISIS, as the Turkish considers the YPG to be a link to the PKK and therefore a terrorist group, as well.

So I think he doesn't like looking bad, but I think—and Ambassador Edelman has actually brought this up and I think it's a really good point—that even if he doesn't bring Gulen back, he wins because keeping Gulen in the United States keeps the U.S. a live target for Turkey to be able to say, "You're not playing fair. We don't like the way that you handle things."

So while he doesn't like looking incompetent on this issue, I think he has an underlying motivation, at least in the Gulen situation, not Zarrab. He would really like Zarrab back. But in the Gulen case, I think that he gains a lot of capital back home by keeping him here.

EDELMAN: Dion, if I could just—so to Lisel's point, which I agree with, I think when Erdogan actually came out and vindicated Merve and me in our op-ed by publicly announcing that he wanted to trade Pastor Andrew Brunson for Gulen, I've never believed he actually was serious about that because I think he knows full well about the U.S. extradition process, the legal requirements to get Gulen, but I think what he's hoping is if the U.S. says, "Well, we can't give you Gulen," that the spotlight would then move to Zarrab and it will become a swap for Zarrab. I think that's what he has in mind.

HINTZ: Yeah.

NISSENBAUM: And do you think that that would be a smart move, to consider some sort of a swap like that?

EDELMAN: No because I think in general what we've seen—I mean first of all, we are faced with a very unpleasant and unprecedented situation, which is that a U.S. treaty ally is dealing with the United States the way we've been accustomed to the IRGC and Hezbollah dealing with the United States, which is to say by taking hostages, either American citizens like Andrew Brunson or long-standing, long-serving U.S. foreign service nationals like Hamza Ulucay in the Adana Consulate.

And my view is that what we've been seeing here consistently now is an effort—we in the United States try and export rule of law to other countries. What we're seeing here is the Erdogan government trying to export its authoritarian thuggery to the United States. And this is only one example of several including the behavior of his bodyguards now under indictment on multiple occasions in the United States.

And I don't think that the United States can be a part of that. I think we have to—if we stand for anything in the world, it's got to be that we stand for rule of law. And I think we ought to let the normal judicial system take its course in the Zarrab case.

NISSENBAUM: Well, Aykan, just pick up on that a little bit, to devil's advocate here. Rule of law, that's what President Erdogan says is going on in Turkey here. These are people accused of serious crimes, of being part of terrorist organizations, accused of aiding and of abetting in a legitimate coup in their country.

Why should we in any way interfere with that? These are people that are accused of serious crimes. Let's let the rule of law take its course. Let the judicial system—this is a NATO ally, democratically elected people such as yourself serve there. Why can't we just let the judicial process take its course?

ERDEMIR: Actually that's a great question because early on in the case, I have run into quite a number of U.S. citizens who had question marks. They were saying this is horrible that, kind of, a pastor is being detained, but maybe he was kind of mixed up in some shady deals. So every time we go into the details of any of these cases, then people are shocked because, for example, in the case of Andrew Brunson, the first time he had access to an attorney was when he was appearing before a judge. And I talked to his attorney. She basically had no idea about the case.

And to this day, Andrew Brunson or his defenders have had no access to the case material. So they are supposed to defend themselves against accusations from a secret witness. There's no opportunity to cross-examine and they don't have any access to the evidence file. That's just the beginning.

The second is the kind of smear campaign that goes on. I went over every single piece written in pro-government media chronologically because that's our only peek into the case file, meaning what is the Turkish government leaking to pro-government press to smear Andrew Brunson, for example.

So one pattern we have seen so far is it changes every week. It's like the flavor of the week. So he was the mastermind of the coup, the aborted coup. Had he succeeded, he would have been promoted to be the director of the CIA. His wife is a CIA agent. He is a former U.S. Special Forces officer. He knew about the aborted coup in 2011, six years before the coup. How did he know? Because his phone was tapped in 2011—this is what was leaked by the government—and he was speaking to a Turkish young man and he promised to give him water purifier used by Special Forces, nutrition pills that he can survive on for five days without eating, and a special scarf that protects both from heat and cold.

And so Andrew Brunson made preparations for the coup six years before the coup, and he got in touch with a Turkish accomplice and gave him material that would allow him to survive through the coup.

Furthermore, he was giving sermons in Kurdish. He doesn't speak Kurdish and giving sermons in Kurdish is not a crime, but still that's the accusation. He was preaching to PKK members trying to convince them to divide Turkey. So he was trying to convince a separatist organization to separate from Turkey and he was praising Fethullah Gulen. He was a member of the PKK and Fethu.

And more recently one major headline read, The Pastor's Bomb. He was accused of masterminding the bombing of the bus carrying the prisoner, prison guards of the maximum security prison he was recently transferred to.

So basically whatever happens in Turkey, it's Andrew Brunson's fault. And there's no way he can defend himself against any of these accusations because I guess he and his defense team can only learn about the accusations from the headlines, the smear headlines in Turkey's pro-government media.

And Andrew Brunson is not alone. He is one individual for whom we have a lot of information and I think that's the perfect exposé of this witch-hunt. But you can see that there are a number of similar cases where we don't have the same level of information, but where there are similar accusations, meaning ludicrous accusations, changing accusations and in almost all cases under state of emergency.

Just to give you a full understanding, pre-trial detention up to seven years, no attorney-client privilege, no access to the case files. And every time you meet with your attorney all your notes can be copied. All the conversation with your attorney can be taped. So this is the condition, this is the "rule of law" under Turkey's state of emergency.

EDELMAN: And can I just add one thing to what Aykan said, because now that I'm a lapsed diplomat I can afford to be totally undiplomatic. Erdogan's taking a leaf from the typical authoritarian handbook. This is also what we hear from Putin. You have your legal process, I have my legal process. All legal processes are equal. What's the problem here?

We don't have problems like this. We have problems of all sorts, but we don't have problems like this with our allies in the U.K. or the Netherlands or Norway. This is something

different and something that obviously, given the kinds of things that Aykan was just describing that anybody who has eyes to discern can see what we're talking about.

Erdogan just made a statement the other day about the indictment of his bodyguards in the United States, saying, “Well this just shows what kind of rule of law they have in United States,” which, as my Erdogan translator would say, “Well, I know a kind of rule of law you have, it's just the kind of rule of law we have here.” I.e. we, you just invested this and you are doing this for political pretext.

Yet anybody in this audience can go on the *New York Times* website and look at the videotape of what happened in front of the Turkish embassy when his bodyguards were here. You can see for yourself. So Erdogan is in the position now of saying you can believe me or you can believe your lying eyes.

HINTZ: Just really quickly, I think it's also important, to add to Aykan's point, it's not just ludicrous accusations but also completely banal things. I mean you could be arrested for having an app on your phone. You could be arrested for having a dollar bill in your bag. You could be arrested for having a bank account. I mean are there Gulen members who may have been supporting the coup who have bank accounts? Probably. But are there people who are not related to this at all?

And I think that this is the really dangerous thing, and we see it both in terms of the Gulen terrorist network supporters as the government calls them as well as painting anyone who has supported any kind of Kurdish independence as a PKK supporter. You see that the word "terrorist" has now been used to paint such a broad swath of people that you can immediately use it to hold anyone, to detain anyone and it's for incredibly un-obsequious reasons.

So I think that this is something that the government, just as Ambassador Edelman was saying, that there's an authoritarian handbook, the dictator's handbook, and they're just taking pages from this and one of them is to try and delegitimize any form of opposition that you can by rhetorically vilifying them by using politically potent words like "terrorist" that can then sort of be used to, again, to delegitimize anyone who would pose any kind of opposition.

NISSENBAUM: So there's no rule of law that these people can rely on in the country. What do you all see as the path forward here? Are these people just going to essentially rot in prison for years as political bargaining chips with no one willing to try and work a way out? Is there any kind of middle way? I'll throw it open to any of you that may think—

HINTZ: One quick thing—and I guess this is also where I would move away from “hostage diplomacy” because when we, although I think it's now crystalized—but I think when we think of it as a “hostage diplomacy” problem, we tend to maybe come up with “hostage diplomacy” solutions, and I don't think that's the best way to go about it.

I also don't think the best way to go about it is to impose a suspension of visas for Turks trying to come to United States. I think that punishes the wrong people. I think it punishes people who want to come to a place where you can have more political freedom and express opposition

and study here and travel here and invest your money here and all the kinds of things we would love people to do.

And then I mean the two-hour later, the response by the Turkish government that now U.S. citizens can't get visas is, of course, frustrating to those of us who like to study Turkey and do research there. And it's frightening to us to think that we might not be able to travel there.

But so I think that that kind of sanction doesn't hit the right person, gives Erdogan again the ammunition he wants to be able to hit back against the west, and is kind of putting us in a stalemate now. And so I think we need to figure out solutions and ways that we can target Erdogan directly as opposed to punishing his own people and kind of giving him the ammunition he needs to target us.

NISSENBAUM: Such as what kind of solution?

HINTZ: So I think things that can target him and his family and his party members. And so pushing, I think Zarrab is a good element of this. I think the fact that Zafer Caglayan, who's a former economy minister, has also been indicted by the United States I think is a very good move. I think any kind of signs that we can apply direct pressure. And for him, whether it's his family or very close members of his party or those who could provide very damning information on very close members of his family and his party, I think that's the best target for our pressure.

EDELMAN: I think ultimately this is a problem that is born of Turkey and will have to have a Turkish solution. The Turkish people are going to have to solve this problem. Turkey is a deeply, deeply divided society. I believe Erdogan has, at best, the support of 50 percent of the country. There's 50 percent of the country that doesn't support him. There are all sorts of structural political reasons why the opposition has been unable to put any real brakes on him, but I'm not 100 percent convinced that that's a permanent situation.

I think the best thing we can do is hold up a mirror to Turkish society by standing for rule of law, by standing for freedom of expression, by standing for human rights, by making it clear that we find it unacceptable—and this is where I differ with Lisel—I think we have to make it clear that it is unacceptable for the government of Turkey to target the Turks who work for the United States embassy and our consulates in Turkey.

I mean if we don't stand up for those people, what Turk would want to come and work for us? We need to make it abundantly clear, and I think that this event although I grant that it's a blunt tool, I think it's actually gotten the government's attention and I think that was the first order of business.

I'm hopeful that when the Zarrab case has made its way through the courts that what will emerge is a picture of corruption and sanctions evasion that will both raise questions about the government and its role in all of this that will be troubling to Turkish citizens, and that there may be further steps that the U.S. government is required to take to deal with the corruption of the banking institutions and others that have facilitated this effort to evade international sanctions against Iran.

NISSENBAUM: These are all certainly long-term solutions that the people sitting in jails aren't going to be very happy to hear. Aykan, do you see any road for a goodwill gesture from Erdogan to let Pastor Brunson go or any way that any of these people could be freed before there's a change in leadership or the courts in America take their course?

ERDEMIR: Erdogan doesn't do goodwill. He likes to play it rough and he only plays with people he respects and the people he respects are the people who play it rough. Erdogan is not stubborn. He has shown incredible flexibility. Just take a look at his relations with Russia. He was accusing Russia of working with Fethullah Gulen, of undermining Turkey and overnight Russia became—kind of—a close ally and Turkey was about to procure an S-400 missile defense system.

Same with Iran, Turkey accused Iran of imperialism and accused Hashd al-Shaabi of being a terrorist organization. And just a couple of weeks ago Turkish diplomats were waving the Hashd flag in Iraq. So Turkey can have this dramatic 180s, same with bilateral relations with Israel. But in every single one of them—with Russia, with Iran, with Israel—there's one common denominator, one is Erdogan is ultra-flexible and he doesn't seem to really have a core I guess foreign policy situation.

But the second one is they all pushed back hard. They all played hard ball to an extent. And I would argue Erdogan only settles with what he sees as adversaries who play it rough. Now, I also agree to a great extent with Eric's comment about the Turkish end and I think the Turkish end is so important that there's also a component for Turkey's friends, Turkey's allies.

Now, this weekend I wrote a Turkish oped on purpose in Turkish for Yeni Arayis and I was addressing Turkey citizens and saying what should Turkey citizens do to remedy the damage from Erdogan's "hostage diplomacy." And it's kind of a long list of things that can be done starting with freeing these hostages; second, compensating; third, going after the police, the prosecutors, the judges, the architects of the smear campaigns and the media for libel and framing innocent individuals. And then making sure this then becomes part of Turkey's training of bureaucrats curriculum in law schools to make sure this never happens again, that this becomes kind of a dark moment in Turkish history which is then a learning opportunity so that we never repeat it again.

Now, this doesn't come from Turkish citizens at this point, right? We believe that 50 percent of the society at least is against Erdogan, but they seem to be keeping a low profile. They might be fearing for their own welfare. Some of them might be kind of really engulfed in these kinds of conspiracy theories themselves.

But ultimately I think this is a moment when Turkey's transatlantic partners should reach out. For example, we see a lot of news about the EU cutting of funds, accession funds basically. I would argue the best way to go forward is to make sure we concentrate all our bilateral and multilateral efforts to engage with Turkey's other half.

What can we do to empower, material-wise, morally, in human resources, communication-wise? What can we do to empower the other Turkey, those citizens who are embarrassed of Turkey's "hostage diplomacy," those citizens who would like restorative justice, those people who would like to make amends, who would like to help build lives of these citizens or foreigners again?

Again, who would like to see Pastor Brunson attend his daughter's wedding in North Carolina which has been postponed because of Erdogan's machinations? So I think this is the time to reach out not necessarily Erdogan with a swap deal but reach out to conscientious Turkey citizens with solidarity.

NISSENBAUM: Listening to the three of you makes me even more grateful that I got out after three days. I'm now part of a learning experience. But let's open it up to some questions now. There are a couple of mics going around. We're going to ask you to, of course, identify yourself, wait for the mic and try and ask a question as opposed to making a statement. We'll just start right here in the front.

QUESTION: Thank you. Ahmet Yayla, George Mason University. I would like to ask about the future of American officers in Turkey like the DA officers who are being threatened right now or like military officers and also the future of Incirlik and the role of Incirlik.

NISSENBAUM: Eric, is there any concern about the Incirlik or the U.S. presence in Turkey?

EDELMAN: So, actually, FDD has addressed this issue. About a year ago, FDD released a report of which I wrote the forward which raised a question not just with Incirlik but also the air base at Al Udeid in Qatar because there's an analogous situation with the Qataris with whom Turkey not surprisingly has allied and has deployed troops to.

I don't believe at this moment there's any threat to Incirlik, although in the aftermath of the coup there were obviously several attempts to impress upon the United States that access to Incirlik could be cut off at any time by the government should it choose to do so. I mean, it's a Turkish base which we have had rotational access to on a pretty much permanent basis since the mid-'50s.

My view is we need to be prepared now for the possibility that we might lose access to Incirlik or that we might choose to leave at some point. I wouldn't put that on the table yet myself, but I think we need to be prepared for it, because I think there is a tendency both in Turkey and Qatar to believe that providing the U.S. access to these bases makes them bulletproof and that they can do whatever the hell they want to our foreign service nationals or citizens because they're just too big to fail and I think we need to break through that.

ERDEMIR: And a reminder about Germany: Germany has recently relocated its fighter jets from Incirlik to an air base in Jordan and that was seen as kind of a landmark move. A NATO ally preferring a non-NATO airbase over a NATO airbase and I think that's telling.

NISSENBAUM: Way in the back there.

QUESTION: Hi. My name is Vedia Eidelman. First of all, thank you so much for holding this panel. The question that I have is I would really love to hear your insight on why the Reza Zarrab case is so important to Erdogan and why it's such a key to opening the eyes of Turkish citizens when none of the previous corruption scandals really made any changes. It just kind of fortified their view of this western conspiracy to undermine Erdogan's authority and Turkey overall. Thank you.

ERDEMIR: May I? I was waiting for this question. OK.

HINTZ: No. All right. I get to go first quickly.

ERDEMIR: We're going to fight over it.

HINTZ: OK. I mean I think the importance of the Reza Zarrab case can't be underlined enough. And you're right that when the corruption case kind of explodes in December of 2013, which is the ultimate splitting point the Gulen movement with the AKP, there've been some tips before over the Kurdish issue and Israel and so forth but this really marks the split in the lover's quarrel.

But what's fascinating for external observers is that, so you have these unbelievably massive cases of corruption and quite, quite open sources of evidence for them. And you have someone going under the name of Fuat Avni who every night at a certain hour was releasing another video. You just kind of sat around waiting for, OK, what's going to come next.

And everything that's tied with the oil-for-gold sanctions evasion and these huge corruption cases goes back—and this is what I was saying earlier in terms of how we can think of targeting Erdogan—to his family and to very prominent members of his party. And so I think the fear is although it seems likely that maybe Reza Zarrab won't testify at all, but the potential to do so in an international environment is quite different from what was going on within Turkey because when you're reading sort of what's happening in the pro-government media and what individual AKP supporters are saying, they're saying, “There's probably some corruption, yes, probably but it's for the good of the economy and it's for the good of the party. And he's a holy figure anyway, so anything he does is inherently good.”

And what's fascinating is that you see in March 2014, so two and a half months after this happened, the AKP wins. They increase their share in the municipal elections and that was actually the first case of pretty rampant electoral manipulation. But the fact that within Turkish society you didn't see a huge pushback against these very open cases of corruption I think is telling. But also the fact that this could happen in the international arena I think has much greater consequences, so that's why I think the Reza Zarrab case is so critical. All right that was longer than I planned.

ERDEMIR: I'm so glad we started with you because I was just going to say that the debate centers around corruption and whether this could embarrass Erdogan. And I have argued

right from the very start that this has nothing to do with corruption, meaning Erdogan does not care. He knows he can't be embarrassed. He knows he can spin anything and everything in Turkey except for one thing and that is the economy itself.

The sole reason Erdogan—I would argue, my provocative statement, the sole reason Erdogan wants Reza Zarrab back is he wants to avoid a potential financial and economic kind of downfall from both the case itself and a potential fine against various Turkish banks to come.

Just a couple of days ago a Turkish daily, a Turkish journalist who probably wasn't in his, thinking clearly, took the risk of publishing a piece saying there were I think five Turkish banks who were going to receive significant fines and that the Turkish investors and the finance world were kind of scared about this. Guess what happened, immediately the daily deleted the piece from its website. Turkey's banking regulatory agency said that they would take legal action against this daily.

Now, that's precisely what is at stake here. In the run-up to March 2019 local elections, which are going to be tough elections for Erdogan, he has already started reshuffling his mayors. And in the run-up to the most difficult election, that is the 2019 November presidential elections, Erdogan cannot afford a fall-out from the Reza Zarrab case. He cannot afford Turkey's second largest public lender to be hit with a potentially multibillion dollar fine. There are several reasons for it: one is the integrity of Turkey's financial system, meaning if it's kind of cut off from the global system, if it has hefty fines to pay, that's bad enough.

But there is one part we're all missing and that is there are roughly five or six cronies who will get 90 percent of all the tenders in Turkey. These are the big construction bosses who fund all of Turkey's kind of pro-government media, who fund the AKP, who sustain the economy.

Now, all of these construction bosses, because they have such shady dealings with the state, can only and only borrow from, guess where, public lenders as well as a couple of other kind of risk-loving private banks.

Now, if kind of Erdogan's banks are hit, those banks will then have to go to these construction bosses and say, sorry, we have to ask for those multibillion dollar loans we have extended to you and that's really disaster in the run-up to elections.

So I think the Reza Zarrab case, as sinister as it sounds, is only and only about money, that is Turkey's economy and the financial system and it's not for wellbeing of the average citizen. It's not the milk or the baby formula Turkey citizens will bring to their family. It's all about the votes, the votes, the votes, you know. Erdogan first winning the local elections and then making sure that he gets 50 percent plus one vote. Because there is one thing Erdogan knows best, Turkish electorates can forgive a lot of things, but the most dramatic reversals have happened right after major economic crises.

HINTZ: Including the rise of the AKP in 2002.

ERDEMIR: Yes, he knows it the best because that's how he came to power.

NISSENBAUM: Would you want to add anything, Eric or do you want to—

EDELMAN: No, my colleagues have been so eloquent that anything I would add would only subtract from the sum total here.

NISSEMBAUM: Sir, here on the front.

QUESTION: Ray Tanter. I served on the Reagan-Bush NSC staff. I'm now at the University of Michigan. And I saw the futility of a president who was almost brought down by trading arms for hostages and I hope that President Trump doesn't go down that route.

My second point which will end in a question, is that I was on Sheridan Square in front of the residence of the Turkish ambassador—it wasn't the embassy—and I saw Turkish American citizens, Kurdish citizens of American descent—of Turkish descent arrested and kicked around. I saw Erdogan give the order to his bodyguards and I testified to the detective and so I will be part of the indictment case. I just hope that other people will stand up and do that kind of thing, as well. That's the question.

NISSENBAUM: The question for the panel is will other people stand up and take a stand, it's a challenge for government I think is the—anything you would want to comment on that?

EDELMAN: I hope so.

HINTZ: Thank you for your service.

NISSENBAUM: And the back there in the glasses.

HAMED: Thank you very much. My name is Wael Hamed and I have a question about the internal motivation of Mr. Erdogan. Of course I understand any ruler in a country like Turkey doesn't like opposition, doesn't like feeling powerless, doesn't like feeling being pressured by others, but is it simply that, is it simply his personality or is it his system of belief being—coming from an Islamist background and being a member of the Muslim Brotherhood?

Could it be attributed to that as well or is it only his personal beliefs, personal faith on that? Thank you.

HINTZ: So I work on identity politics and foreign policy and in this case, I mean there are a lot of, I mean an identity, whatever identity it is you have—and for me I say that the AKP has an Ottoman-Islamist understanding of identity whereby the ideal Turkish citizen is a pious Sunni Muslim who respects patriarchal authority and sees Turkey's foreign policy as anchored in its legitimacy as former home of the caliphate and the sultanate, and therefore Turkey should be a well-respected regional power due to its former imperial glory.

That being said, I don't think any of his desire to stay in power has to do with him being a Muslim or him, you know, being pious or conservative. I think he has an authoritarian populist style of politics. I will caveat that by saying that I think a lot of Erdogan's rise is because he's been able to represent those conservative Muslims who were repressed under previous secular governments or military-sponsored or led governments. So I think he gets a lot of political capital out of that.

I mean he himself is a Hafiz, you know, he's memorized the Quran. He is obviously a very pious person. But that being said I think his desire to stay in power is much more that of an authoritarian populace leader who fears what could happen if he gets out of power. Because I think—and Sinan Ciddi was here earlier, Director of the Institute of Turkish Studies at Georgetown, he's written on how this is an existential crisis for Erdogan such that once he leaves power, he could be subject to, you know, a whole lot of problems that could make his life and that of his family very, very difficult.

And so, you know, we also see his potential to sort of hand the reins over to his son-in-law to keep things in the family, so to speak. So I would say that he uses Islam as a collective mobilization tool. We saw this during the coup attempt when, you know, it was broadcast from the mosques' speakers that, you know, people need to come out into the street and defend the government and so forth. And it's quite an effective one, but I think it's much more of a tool of we were the oppressed, we are now in power, you should keep me in power and so forth. I think it has much more to do with that than it has to do with any ideology that comes from Islam.

QUESTION: Hello? OK. My name is Laura Kelly. I'm a reporter for the Washington Times. Going back to the protestors that were beat up outside the Turkish residence office, question for anyone on the panel, did the Trump Administration miss an opportunity to have a more public show force against Erdogan by condemning the actions of the security guards, or was it important that they kind of, you know, they made their statements saying that this was wrong, but then we really haven't seen anything more publicly against it?

NISSENBAUM: Eric, do you want to take a shot?

EDELMAN: Well, at that time having after watching the videotape and after watching the role that Ambassador Kilic played in directing all of this, you know, I thought there was at least an argument or a case for expelling him. I wish that the department had actually at least considered that and at least let it be known that they had considered that.

But I think in the long run, I believe that letting the legal process work its way out and indicting them, making it impossible for them to return to the United States which means Erdogan cannot bring them back to the United States was the right thing to do.

HINTZ: I also think, just really quickly that—so following that, I think just a couple—just a couple of weeks ago that Erdogan was here and another protester was beaten up.

EDELMAN: In New York.

HINTZ: Exactly, in New York and not only did Trump miss an opportunity, he completely bungled it by having these incredibly cordial relations with Erdogan by, you know, kind of bloviating in a way that, "Oh we're these best of friends," and, you know, "he's getting very, very high marks." I don't know who would be giving Erdogan getting very, very high marks. So I think he was speaking off the cuff as he tends to and I think he missed an opportunity, you know, to criticize something that had happened just, you know, several hours before, or not necessarily to openly criticize it, but rather not to be quite so glowing in the comments that he was making.

NISSENBAUM: They did take a few subtle steps right, like blocking the security services from getting handguns for instance, quiet steps, but nothing very publicly, right?

HINTZ: Yeah.

NISSENBAUM: I think we've got time maybe for one or two more questions. Here.

CHURCH: I'm Allen Church, Ambassador with the National Clergy Council. And this lovely lady and I had a conversation before and she wanted me to ask a couple of questions.

First of all I just want to say I really am very concerned about all of those being persecuted and held in prison, but particularly Andrew Brunson. I'm a Presbyterian. We went to the same theological seminary and no one was trained in the overthrow of countries. So I have a funny feeling that didn't take place. And I have been in contact with his wife, Norine.

ERDEMIR: Were you also in the Special Forces with him?

HINTZ: Building mosques.

CHURCH: I cannot divulge my connections. But when Saeed Abedini was released, I had an opportunity to have lunch with him and he was very adamant that he was concerned about the nature of his release. He wanted to get out of prison obviously, be released from the Iranians, but he saw the linkage with the money that was transferred to the Iranian regime at the same time.

And while I'm looking back at that conversation, at how embarrassed he was about that and yet at the same time, you know, very thankful that he was released, it dawned on me and I was talking with him, that that was sort of the beginning of a very clear message on the political front that the U.S. could be manipulated to make some serious deals.

And so I know, you know there's concern about President Trump being a deal maker and susceptible, but I would—do you think it's you know, a real possibility that that was the beginning, like he said?

EDELMAN: Well I actually testified about the Iran hostage release deal in January of 2016. I testified in September of 2016 in front of the Senate Banking Committee. And so I would

say you are right. I think, you know, our policy for many, many years, certainly the entire time I served in government was that we do not negotiate with hostage takers.

I think the best face you can put on what happened in January 2016 was that it muddied the waters, you know. I testified to the fact that—and my testimony is online, you can find it—that looking at the sequence of events it was very hard to see this as anything other than a ransom payment. One of the other people who testified on that panel that day is now representing Mr. Zarrab.

NISSENBAUM: OK one last question here and then we'll round it up. Sir?

QUESTION: My name is Kani Xulam. I'm with the American-Kurdish Information Network. Yesterday Ali Atalan, a member of Turkish Parliament, asked Prime Minister Yildirim about 48 Kurdish corpses that are kept hostage by the Turkish government. Quoting the prosecutor of Nusaybin telling their loved ones you should forget about their bodies.

What is the rationale of the Turkish government to deny Kurds a decent burial? Has Erdogan become the king of Creon of Antigone fame and will we have perhaps his ending too?

NISSENBAUM: Interesting questions, I'm not sure any of you are well equipped to answer.

HINTZ: It's certainly not—it's certainly not the first time the Kurds have not been able to bury their loved ones due to the policies of the AKP, during the siege in Cizre and in other provinces in Turkey, you know, we saw curfews. We saw people dying because of lack of water, lack of medicine and not to be able to bury your dead within a very short amount of time is really quite tragic for a lot of those citizens.

I think, you know, the Turkish government has gone back and forth with—and this actually goes to Aykan's point about how flexible Erdogan can be. Because the Kurds for a long time were not necessarily something the Erdogan thought that he wanted to deal with. He tried a couple of openings to the Kurds, the Kurdish opening in 2009. Very superficial, it didn't really work very well.

But the Cozum sureci, or the solution process from 2013 to 2015, was the first time that there actually were, speaking of negotiations, direct negotiations with the PKK. Steps were made such that there was an agreement for the PKK to disarm, to withdraw, there would be certain cultural rights and so forth given to the Kurds in exchange. And when it became very clear that the Kurds were no longer willing to support Erdogan's presidential project—that is sort of the ultimate outcome of the referendum for him to be president and for him to consolidate power in the executive—it became quite clear that they were a threat to him and that they were not willing to support him.

And Kurds saw for example in Kobani with, you know, ISIS fighters being able to flow easily across the border from Turkey into Syria and back and forth, with the Turkish government

refusing to assist Kurds who are being targeted in Kobani that the Turkish government didn't have their back, why should they have its.

And so we see that the Kurds are able to have this amazing electoral outcome in June of 2015 where they get, you know, 13 percent of the vote, they passed the 10 percent threshold and that is—turns Erdogan around quickly and he's realizing not only are they not supporting me, but they are a threat. And so, you know in July 2015 you see that the Turkish government starts bombing the PKK again.

And so the Kurds have become a tool for Erdogan and I think that they have been abused by many governments and I think that it's incredibly unfortunate that just because they could potentially scupper one man's political ambitions that they've had to suffer what they've had to suffer.

ERDEMIR: Just a quick comment following, building on yours. You know, thanks to my colleagues at FDD, we have very detailed documentation on hostages in Turkey and we have always focused on people who are alive. Actually it never occurred to us to add corpses as hostages, but I think we should start doing it.

And it's not only about Kurds, because Erdogan's government has also done the same practice with ethnic Turkish volunteers who fought against ISIS in Kobani. So one of the ways to discourage Turkish citizens in general, regardless of ethnicity, from fighting against ISIS was to make sure that corpses would never be repatriated. And there were a couple of parents in a typical Antigone story who were trying to get a hold of their sons and daughters.

So I guess that's also another face of “hostage diplomacy” and maybe a third face could be it's not necessarily taking hostage, but preventing people from burying their dead where they want to bury. This happened very recently with the HDP kind of co-chair's mother.

But there have been cases where either state officials or thugs working closely with state officials would intimidate—

HINTZ: Disrupt funerals.

ERDERMIR: —funerals or disrupt funerals. And in one case they even removed the mother of an HDP politician from her grave and she had to be then buried elsewhere where it would be safer.

HINTZ: Who by the way was in jail and was only released from jail for the funeral and then was—

ERDEMIR: Yeah and she missed—ultimately she ended up missing her mother's funeral, so that's the dark side.

NISSENBAUM: Well thank you, thank you to the three of you. Thank you—forgive me if I didn't get to your questions. I'm sure the three of them will be willing to talk afterwards. If we

can just wrap up, we'll just start down here and go down real quickly for a few closing comments on where do you think things are headed. People talk about this being a major crisis between the Turkey and U.S. relations because of the visa issue. Do you have any closing thoughts about the road ahead and what may be the next steps if it's not going to be some breakthrough or hostage deal?

ERDEMIR: Yes, this will be my classic comment, engage, engage, engage. Never disengage from Turkey whether it's the government or the citizens. On the government side, take a look at what Russia, Iran and Israel have done. Learn from it and engage the way in which Erdogan wants to be engaged. And vis-à-vis engaging Turkish citizens, you know, not the ones who are applauding, you know, torture and executions and "hostage diplomacy," but what I believe is the majority of Turkish citizens who want to be committed to transatlantic values, to a future in the European Union, you know, freedom of religion and thought and markets.

Engage them because they need your solidarity more than ever. They need EU's accession funds, you know, pre-accession aid more than ever, and they need their American kind of counterparts, this solidarity more than ever. So engagement is the way forward.

NISSENBAUM: Lisel.

HINTZ: I guess I was supposed to bring sort of a European perspective to things, I don't know that I've necessarily done that, but I'll end with a European perspective which is engage, engage, engage, and EU members, do not give up on Turkey. Will this state become a member of the EU with the AKP in government? No, it won't. But if you disengage, you lose a major anchor, you lose a major incentive structure and you disappoint a lot of Turks who see the EU as sort of their only way out.

NISSENBAUM: Ambassador?

EDELMAN: You know, I think in some quarters there's a disposition to believe that the current so-called visa crisis is just another blip in a kind of tumultuous U.S.-Turkish relationship that's had its ups and downs. And as a result I think you tend to see sort of prescriptions for U.S. government policy that sound an awful lot like, you know, what we have already been doing for, you know, for 10 these many years, more high level visits, more military-to-military engagement.

I don't think that's going to solve this problem. And the one thing I've learned about this over the last 15 years is if people tell you, "Well it's really hit rock bottom, it can't worse," it can and it will.

NISSENBAUM: On that optimistic note, thank you so much to the three of you.

HINTZ: Thank you.

NISSENBAUM: Thank you for coming.

END.

