

After coup attempt, Turkey cracks down on Protestants

by [Dominique Bonessi](#) in the [January 4, 2017](#) issue

After a weeklong business trip in the U.K., American pastor Ryan Keating was detained at the Istanbul airport overnight, interrogated, and then put on a plane back to London.

“They locked me in a room they called the guest house with 15 to 20 other people,” Keating said, recalling the night of October 8. “Some were suspected of being terrorists and ISIS members.”

The following morning, he was forced to sign a statement acknowledging that he was being banned for life from a country where he had spent much of the last 23 years and where his wife and children were still living.

“I was deemed a threat to national security,” he said. “That has become a blanket label used to deport anyone they don’t want without any evidence or investigation.”

Keating’s airport lockup happened a day after another pastor, Andrew Brunson, was detained along with his wife, Norine, in the coastal town of Izmir, where he had lived for 20 years. The couple, who were working to help refugees, were told they were a threat to national security.

Analysts say President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s government has been targeting American Christians in retaliation for the refusal of the United States to extradite Pennsylvania-based cleric Fethullah Gülen, as demanded by the Turkish government.

Gülen, a former Erdogan ally, is the spiritual leader of a brand of Islam different from the president’s Justice and Development Party. The Turkish leader alleges that Gülen was behind a failed coup attempt last July.

[The Niagara Foundation, one of several organizations connected to Gülen, released statements condemning the coup attempt, including one from Gülen himself, soon after it occurred. The organization says Erdogan is making Gülen a scapegoat.]

“Protestant or Christian churches are seen as an American influence, and now that Turkey is anti-American they are being targeted even more,” said Aykan Erdemir, a senior fellow with the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and a former member of the Turkish parliament.

Erdogan has responded to the coup attempt with a massive crackdown on perceived opponents. Tens of thousands of Turkish citizens have been arrested and many have been fired from public sector jobs.

Turkey is 99 percent Muslim, according to official estimates, though the country’s constitution defines it as a secular state. According to the U.S. State Department’s *International Religious Freedom Report*, the rights of minorities such as Jews and Armenian and Greek Orthodox Christians are limited.

The State Department estimates that about 7,000 Protestants live in this nation of 75 million. Law enforcement authorities view Christian proselytism with suspicion.

Prior to his arrest, Keating worked as a minister at the Kurtulus Church in Ankara and was completing his Ph.D. in philosophy of religion at Ankara University.

Asked whether he encouraged any Turkish Muslims to embrace Christianity, Keating said, “I have often helped people to learn about Christianity. I have talked and prayed with people who wanted to become Christians.”

Through his church’s Ankara Refugee Ministry, Keating also helped provide clothing, food, and medical assistance to 6,000 Syrian and Iraqi refugee families in the Ankara area.

“It is crazy, helping refugees is not a crime,” said Ihsan Ozbek, president of the Association of Protestant Churches and a friend of Keating. “Ryan is a good man and has been trying to help as many people as he can. That is how we live our lives. We are Christians, and we help people.”

Since 2007, the Association of Protestant Churches has released its own human rights report each year. The most recent, the 2015 report, gives seven to ten accounts of hate crimes and physical and verbal assault committed against Protestants countrywide. Ozbek said the government has not sponsored these acts, but neither does it offer aid.

“We have continuous problems, but they are not helping us,” he said. —Religion News Service