

# Turkish court rejects release appeal of US pastor



Andrew Craig Brunson, an evangelical pastor from Black Mountain, North Carolina, arrives at his house in Izmir, Turkey, on July 25, 2018. (PHOTO: AP Photo/Emre Tazegul via Times of Israel).

*Originally published in [Premier Christian News](#)*

A Turkish court has rejected the release appeal made by the lawyer of a US pastor who is central to the diplomatic row between the US and Turkey.

The court ruled that Pastor Andrew Brunson – who faces 35 years in prison for terror-related charges, will remain under house-arrest.

The North Carolina evangelist was transferred from jail to home detention for health reasons.

Mr Brunson has received support from the White House who has imposed sanctions on two Turkish officials over his continued detention.

Press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders told reporters on Wednesday that Mr Brunson is “a very good person and a strong Christian who’s done nothing wrong”.

She added that Turkey has treated him “very unfairly, very badly”.

Meanwhile, on the same day that Turkey rejected the appeal, it received international support from Qatar after the Arabic country pledged to invest \$15 billion into the country.

Although the amount is a small fraction of what Turkey would need to fix its economy or pay its debts, Turkish media reported the investment as a victory for President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Turkey announced on Wednesday that it was increasing tariffs on imports of some US products, escalating a feud with America which has helped trigger a currency crisis.

The Turkish government said it will impose extra tariffs on imports of products including rice, vehicles, alcohol, coal and cosmetics. Tariffs on American cars were doubled to 120 per cent, while tariffs on alcoholic drinks soared to 140 per cent.

Turkish vice president Fuat Oktay said on Twitter that the tariffs on certain products were increased “within the framework of the principle of reciprocity in retaliation for the deliberate economic attacks by the United States”.

The tariffs come a day after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Turkey would boycott US electronic goods, singling out iPhones.

The Turkish lira has dropped to record lows in recent weeks, having fallen some 42 per cent so far this year.

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# Pastor Andrew Brunson transferred to house arrest



A prison vehicle, believed to be carrying jailed US pastor Andrew Brunson, leaves from the Aliaga Prison and Courthouse complex in Izmir, Turkey, July 18 2018. (PHOTO: Reuters)

*Originally published in [Christian Today](#)*

An American pastor who has been detained in Turkey for nearly two years on terrorism charges, straining ties between Ankara and Washington, has been transferred from jail to house arrest, broadcaster CNN Turk said on Wednesday July 18 2018.

The report came one week after a Turkish court ruled to keep Andrew Brunson, a Christian pastor from North Carolina, in detention while he is tried for terrorism and espionage.

Brunson's case has deepened a rift between NATO allies Washington and Ankara. The Turkish lira strengthened to 4.8340

against the dollar from 4.8599 before the report.

US embassy and consulate officials in Turkey could not immediately comment on the report and Brunson's lawyer told Reuters he was seeking confirmation.

CNN Turk said Brunson will be fixed with an electronic ankle bracelet or similar monitoring device and is banned from leaving the country.

The pastor, who has lived in Turkey for more than two decades, was indicted on charges of helping the group that Ankara blames for a failed 2016 coup against President Tayyip Erdogan, as well as supporting outlawed PKK Kurdish militants.

Brunson, who denies the charges, faces up to 35 years in jail if found guilty. President Donald Trump said in a tweet last week Brunson was being held hostage and that Erdogan should 'do something to free this wonderful Christian husband and father'.

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## **Hopes dashed for release of US pastor held in Turkey**



Pastor Andrew Brunson, pictured in January.

*Originally published in [World Watch Monitor](#)*

Hopes were dashed for the imminent release of an American pastor jailed in Turkey on terrorism charges as a Turkish court today ordered him to remain behind bars.

The court scheduled Andrew Brunson's next hearing for October 12.

Some observers had believed that Turkey might release Brunson, who has been detained for nearly two years. The pastor of a small church in Izmir, he is accused of having links with supporters of the Muslim cleric Fethullah Gülen, who is blamed for the failed 2016 coup against President Erdogan, and the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party. Brunson denies all the charges.

### **Brunson's supporters disappointed at outcome**

Today, the court heard testimony from four witnesses: three for the prosecution, and one for the defence. Brunson's lawyer's request for his first choice defence witness was bypassed, so another witness appeared. Brunson's supporters were disappointed at today's outcome, having been encouraged by recent talks at the diplomatic level.

As the Al-Monitor news website noted this week, Donald Trump and his Turkish counterpart Recep Erdogan were “[all smiles as they were photographed exchanging fist bumps](#)” at last week’s NATO summit in Brussels. That meeting was followed by a 15-minute phonecall on Monday (July 16), during which Brunson’s case was discussed, according to the Turkish pro-government daily newspaper, Sabah.

In April, Trump tweeted in support of Brunson, saying he was “being persecuted in Turkey for no reason”.

*Pastor Andrew Brunson, a fine gentleman and Christian leader in the United States, is on trial and being persecuted in Turkey for no reason. They call him a Spy, but I am more a Spy than he is. Hopefully he will be allowed to come home to his beautiful family where he belongs!*

– Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) [April 18, 2018](#)

However, a former opposition member of the Turkish parliament told Al-Monitor that powerful forces are working against Brunson. Aykan Erdemir, now a senior fellow at the Washington-based Foundation for Defence of Democracies, told Al-Monitor: “Both the pro-government media and the prosecutor’s office have dug themselves deep in framing Brunson as a terrorist, and it will be a challenge for them to pull a U-turn.”

He added that Erdogan’s nationalist allies “have a proven track record of anti-Christian and anti-missionary prejudice and would not welcome Brunson’s release.”

In late June, two US senators, Republican Lindsey Graham and Democrat Jeanne Shaheen, met President Erdoğan in Ankara after visiting Pastor Brunson in prison in Aliağa, Izmir. The pair called for the US to enact sanctions against Turkey over Brunson’s detention. According to Al-Monitor, the senators had “not minced their words” in their meeting with Erdogan, and

believed he may not have been “properly briefed” about the seriousness of the sanctions, but he “now understood”.

### **Scathing appraisal of proceedings**

After Brunson’s previous hearing, in Aliaga in May, Sandra Jolley, Vice Chair of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, released a scathing appraisal of the way the proceedings were carried out. After attending the 11-hour session, during which the judge dismissed all of Brunson’s witnesses, [she said in a statement](#):

“We leave the courthouse with serious concerns. Today’s 11 hours of proceedings were dominated by wild conspiracies, tortured logic, and secret witnesses, but no real evidence to speak of. Upon these rests a man’s life.

“Worse still, the judge’s decision at the conclusion of today’s hearing to dismiss all of the witnesses called by Pastor Brunson’s defence without listening to a single minute of their testimony is simply unconscionable.”

The pastor and his Turkish lawyer finally learned the specific allegations on which his charges of alleged espionage and terrorism are based, most of them from “secret witnesses”, only a month or so before his first court hearing. The prosecution has demanded 35 years in prison if Brunson is convicted of these charges, all of which he denied in a [six-hour defence](#) before Izmir’s Second Criminal Court at his hearing on April 16.

Bill Campbell, Pastor of Hendersonville (NC) Presbyterian Church, attended the hearing in Aliaga, Turkey.

“As usual, there was much spurious testimony against Andrew,” Campbell said via encrypted text message following adjournment of the proceedings. “Andrew’s testimony was absolutely powerful. He presented the gospel with confidence and defended himself with boldness. The court allowed for the first time a favourable witness, and one who was to speak against him

actually spoke in Andrew's favour. It felt like they had decided the outcome before the trial."

## **Andrew Brunson timeline**

1993 – present

US Protestant pastor Andrew Brunson involved in legally recognised church-related Christian ministry in Turkey.

2016:

July 15 – Deadly military coup attempt against Turkish government fails; Ankara blames network of US-based Turkish cleric Fethullah Gulen for coup, seeks Gulen's extradition from US.

July 20 – Turkish President declares state of emergency (still in force), suspending certain judicial practices; 110 000 public officials dismissed, 35 000 Gulen suspects under arrest, awaiting trial.

October 7 – Brunson detained with wife Norine, in Alsancak police station, Izmir; told he would be deported within 15 days as "threat to national security".

October 19 – Norine Brunson released from police detention.

October 20 – Andrew Brunson moved to Harmandali Detention Centre (outskirts of Izmir), placed in solitary confinement.

December 9 – Summoned (with lawyer) to closed hearing at Izmir 2nd Criminal Court. Charges changed to "membership in an [unnamed] armed terrorist organisation". Placed under formal arrest in overcrowded group cell at Aliaga Sakran Prison (45 miles from Izmir).

December 20 – US Senator James Lankford meets Turkish Justice Ministry officials in Ankara, the capital.

December 29 – Izmir court rejects lawyer's appeal to release



Brunson.

2017:

January 3 – Unnamed senior Turkish official to Wall Street Journal says claim that Brunson's arrest related to his religious affiliation is "ludicrous".

February 15 – 78 US Congress members write to Turkish President Erdogan, urging him to release Brunson.

March 9 – Turkish Prime Minister Yildirim tells USA Today it's a "nonsensical" idea that Brunson held hostage until Turkish cleric Gulen's extradition from US; says pastor's case could be "accelerated".

March 28 – Brunson sends appeal letter to US President Trump.

March 30 – US Secretary of State Tillerson meets Norine Brunson in Ankara.

May 15 – American Centre for Law & Justice files petition to UN Human Rights Council for Brunson's release.

May 16 – Trump asks Erdogan in person during Washington DC visit to release Brunson.

Late May-June – Flurry of Turkish media allegations against Brunson link him with Gulen movement, armed PKK separatists, CIA, "missionary" activities.

May 30 – Erdogan promises "retaliation" vs countries holding Gulen movement suspects.

July 7 – Washington Post reports Turkey's swap offer to exchange Brunson for release of millionaire Turkish-Iranian prisoner Reza Zarrab, facing trial in New York for evading US-led Iran sanctions.

July 17 – Brunson moved to shared cell in Kiriklar Maximum

Security Prison in Izmir's Buca district.

July 24 – New charges of “espionage and insurgency” against Brunson reported in Turkish press.

August 24 – Izmir judge initiates video conference call with Brunson and his lawyer; pastor informed his official criminal charges are “spying and insurgency”.

August 25 – New “state of emergency” Executive Order No. 694 authorises Erdogan to arrange to swap Turkish citizen prisoners for foreigners jailed in Turkey.

September 28 – Erdogan publicly declares swap offer of Brunson for Gulen's extradition.

October 5 – Two representatives of US Commission for International Religious Freedom visit Brunson at Kiriklar Prison.

November 15 – Brunson's daughter Jacqueline addresses US Helsinki Commission hearing, Washington DC.

2018:

January 3 – Brunson's 50th birthday.

January 11 – Erdogan vows no extraditions to US until Gulen returned from US to Turkey.

January 23 – US delegation visiting Ankara raises Brunson's “wrongful detention”.

March 9 – Jacqueline Brunson addresses UN Human Rights Commission, Geneva.

March 13 – Written indictment against Brunson leaked to Turkish press.

March 16 – Indictment accepted by Izmir 2nd Criminal Court; first trial date set for April 17.

March 26 – Brunson’s North Carolina Senator Thom Tillis visits him at Kiriklar Prison.

April 17 – First trial hearing: Brunson denies all charges, three prosecution witnesses testify; observed by US Ambassador for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback and Senator Thom Tillis.`

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## **How this blind Iraqi refugee memorised 87 chapters of the Bible**



“Fadhil”, who is blind, has memorised 87 chapters of the Bible by listening to a solar-powered audio Bible. (PHOTO: YouTube)

*Originally published in [Faithwire](#)*

An extraordinary story has emerged of an Iraqi refugee who

managed to memorise 87 chapters of the Bible, despite being completely blind. “Fadhil,” whose name has been changed for security reasons, is a refugee in Amman, Jordan who has an innate passion for the Word of God. Clearly, the obvious question is “how?”

Well, using a solar-powered audio Bible provided by evangelistic ministry [Leading The Way](#).

Leading the Way was founded by Dr Michael Youssef in 1988 with a fundamental vision to reach the Middle East for Christ and evangelise the Muslim world.

According to its website, “the ministry utilises field ministry teams to evangelise seekers, disciple new believers, and help the persecuted in places where it is dangerous to follow Christ.”

“It was convicting, because for us we memorise a couple of verses. But he memorised chapters. He just meditates on scriptures day in and day out,” said one of Leading the Way’s partners, David Bottoms. “Fadhil is someone who would seem unremarkable by the ways of the world. But God doesn’t choose to reveal Himself through the mighty and the powerful and the rich. He reveals Himself through the poor and the humble,” added another partner, Ron Hughes.

In a video released by Leading the Way, Fadhil can be seen talking about his experience of immersing himself in scripture.

Watch the video below:

Bottoms said that the blind man was “so overjoyed” to receive the solar audio Bible from the organisation. Remarkably, the device weighs just 2.3 ounces (65 grams) and is smaller than an iPhone. “Day in, day out, he just listens,” he noted.

Hughes recalled the profound experience of being present in a

room with such a spiritual giant, where the Word of God was being lifted high in the midst of such humble surroundings.

“God doesn’t choose to reveal himself through the mighty and the powerful and the rich,” he said. “God chooses to reveal himself through the poor, the humble and the infirm. Being in this small, modest home and being in the presence of greatness and being in the presence of God as His Word was magnified and filled the room and filled the hearts of everyone who was there was an amazing experience.”

Hughes said the organisation is “changing hearts, changing minds and glorifying God on the ground in the Middle East,” adding that this was a part of the world that is “starving for God’s love.”

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## **Netanyahu: “I completely agree with the leaders of Hamas”**

*Originally published in [Breaking Israeli News](#)*

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu makes a shocking statement regarding the recent Hamas-led riots that threatened Israel’s southern border: Netanyahu stated that he agrees with the declarations made by Hamas leaders.

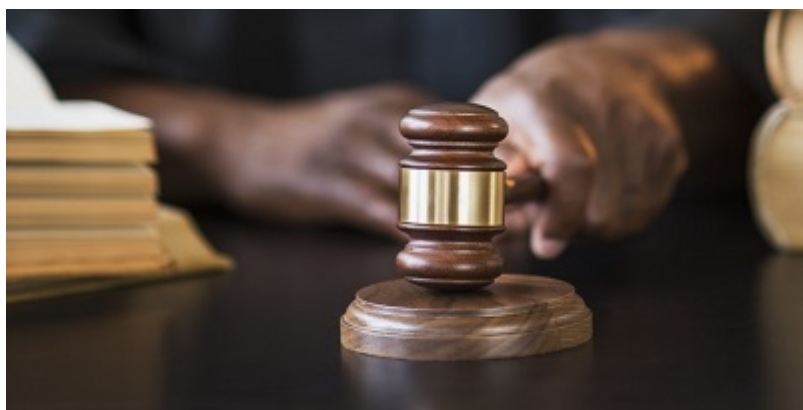
### [PM NETANYAHU ON HAMAS](#)

*Prime Minister Netanyahu: "Ready for a real shocker"?*

*Gepostet von [Hananya Naftali](#) am Donnerstag, 17. Mai 2018*

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# Turkey slammed for 'sham' trial of US pastor



*Originally published in [ACLJ](#)*

In an outrageous miscarriage of justice, the trial in Turkey of captive American Pastor Andrew Brunson, just got a lot worse.

In a cruel show of abject hostility and blatant disregard for any semblance of the rule of law – proving beyond a shadow of a doubt that this trial is a completely and utter sham – the Turkish judges essentially threw out all the witnesses for Pastor Andrew's defense.

We recently reported how over the course of 11 grueling hours, seven witnesses for the prosecution (two secret and five open – two of whom were prisoners and only one of whom had ever actually even met Pastor Andrew) were allowed to give testimony against him. When the pastor's Turkish attorney pointed out that one of these men had been convicted on 14 counts of fraud, the lead judge claimed he didn't see how the fact was relevant. In fact, the judge said that all the prosecution witnesses' statements would be taken as fact.

But when Pastor Andrew's Turkish attorney then submitted his own list of witnesses for the defence, the head judge declared that anyone who was a suspect would not be allowed to testify. Even worse, he disregarded the remaining witnesses for the pastor, stating that they wouldn't have anything relevant to say.

Essentially the message is they aren't going to allow anyone to testify on Pastor Andrew's behalf. This ruling can't even be appealed until after it is put in writing— even more delays.

This isn't justice. This is a sham, a show trial built on made-up charges to imprison an American pastor because of his Christian faith. In fact, this isn't a trial at all. It's a hostage taking.

The judges then delayed the trial yet again – this time until July 18. That's two months away, while Pastor Andrew continues to languish in a prison in Turkey.

Pastor Andrew is being held as a political prisoner. He has been charged with "Christianisation." He has committed no crime.

It's an absolute outrage.

Turkey is playing political games with an innocent Christian pastor's life. They're dangling him while demanding the exchange of a Turkish cleric freely living in the United States.

Enough is enough.

We need the whole world to apply maximum pressure on Turkey – a supposed NATO ally. We told you how 66 U.S. senators and 50 members of the European Parliament sent letters to Turkey's president demanding Pastor Andrew's freedom. President Trump has also called for his release, and recently tweeted he

should be “allowed to come home to his beautiful family.” We must build on this momentum before it is too late.

We remain directly involved in his legal defense in Turkey. We continue to work aggressively in Congress, with the State Department, the White House, the European Parliament, and the European Council to fight for Pastor Andrew’s freedom. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has agreed to take his case and we are hopeful they too will find this is a gross violation of his human rights.

This sham trial must end and he must be set free. Please join with over half a million supporters and [sign the petition](#) demanding his freedom.

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## **British group repent in Israel as war clouds hang over anniversary celebrations**



A dark shadow of imminent war hangs over Israel’s 70th anniversary celebrations, just as it had done at the nation’s re-birth in 1948.



President Trump's withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran hastened the prospect of the rogue state taking out its frustration on Israel for striking its military installations in Syria.

In an incident on Tuesday night, at least nine Iranian soldiers are reported to have been killed.<sup>1</sup> And in the early hours of Thursday the Israeli Defense Force launched an unprecedented massive air strike destroying Iranian and Syrian targets in response to a barrage of rockets fired from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard.

Also coinciding with what should have been a joyful birthday is an event recalling a very sad – indeed shameful – episode in Britain's history.

At a special ceremony organised by Love Never Fails (an alliance of Christian groups supporting the Jewish state) and held yesterday in Atlit, near the port of Haifa, Israelis spoke of how they suffered at the time and UK representatives responded with expressions of sorrow for our failures both then and now.

Granted a League of Nations mandate to prepare a safe homeland for Jews, Britain instead severely restricted immigration just when it was needed most during the Nazi genocide.

And in the immediate aftermath of World War II, Britain shattered the hopes of traumatised survivors by turning their ships away or by herding them into detention camps. Some were even sent back to Germany where millions of their fellow Jews had been slaughtered.

Thousands of Jewish refugees were held in the Atlit Camp, interred behind barbed wire complete with watchtowers – and this in their own land, promised by Britain in 1917.

As part of a prepared declaration of sorrow, the UK delegation told their Jewish friends: "We grieve that [Britain's

policies] led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Jews who could have escaped Hitler's 'Final Solution' if the gates to their ancient homeland had been fully open."

And they added: "We are deeply sorry that our nation caused indescribable distress to untold numbers of your people and their surviving families, and that as a nation we dared to stand against the purpose of Almighty God to restore you to Eretz (the land of) Israel."

A particularly shocking incident – on July 18 1947 – involved an attack by British forces on a ship carrying 4 515 Holocaust survivors, spraying fuel and throwing smoke bombs in order to deter the immigrants from landing.

I have touched on this and many other aspects of Britain's role with Israel in my new book, *A Nation Reborn (Christian Publications International)*.

As Italian author Edda Fogarollo put it: "Quite apart from the suffering experienced by these exiles during the Nazi atrocities, they also had to face the humiliation of having hoped in vain for freedom as their dream turned into a nightmare. After seizing the ship, the British re-routed it back to Europe – to the former concentration camp of Poppendorf, near Hamburg, of all places!"<sup>2</sup>

One of our great callings as Gentile Christians is to bring comfort to God's chosen people, who have experienced so much suffering at the hands of those who hate them, just as Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, was despised and rejected of men.

Like him, they were led like lambs to the slaughter during the Holocaust – and we too have blood on our hands, having played our part in causing them to suffer such terrible grief and horror. For that we must repent.

Yet out of the ashes – a valley of dry bones – rose a new nation reflecting something of the resurrection power of Christ. Surviving a series of wars against overwhelming odds

to emerge as a world leader in hi-tech innovation and much else besides has been nothing short of miraculous. They are even first on the scene of major disasters to help other nations in distress while their doctors treat the wounded among their enemies.

And they have been so keen to live at peace with their neighbours that they have given up land to which they were legally entitled. But that hasn't proved enough for Iran and its proxies, Hezbollah and Hamas, who have vowed to wipe Israel off the map.

However, God has not called us to join the UN-sponsored chorus of disapproval, but to "Comfort, comfort my people..." and tell them that "her sin has been paid for..." (Isaiah 40.1f)

Not only must we bless and support them, but we are especially charged to tell them that their sins have been paid for – in other words, that the Lord Jesus, whom we Christians serve, also died for them. We have the awesome privilege of sharing the good news that our beloved Christ is their Messiah, who came to seek the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

But a furious battle for truth rages on as belligerent rioters further inflame tensions on the Gaza border in the mistaken belief that they have been robbed of their land and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is forced to counter Iranian propaganda about their nuclear program.

Citing intelligence reports, he said Iran had lied about never having pursued nuclear weapons and had continued to preserve and expand its knowledge of the same even after signing the 2015 deal with global powers designed to curb Iranian capabilities.<sup>3</sup>

The Bible clearly speaks of such deceit, thus: "Not a word from their mouth can be trusted; their heart is filled with malice. Their throat is an open grave; with their tongues they tell lies." (Psalm 5.9)

All who desire to follow the truth – specifically manifested in Jesus Christ (John 14.6) – must surely see where the path leads.

1World Israel News, 9th May 2018

2Towards the Establishment of the State of Israel (Christians for Israel)

3JNN, 1st May 2018, quoting Reuters

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# Tanzania opens embassy in Israel



Tanzania's Minister for Foreign Affairs Augustine Phillip Mahiga addresses the United Nations General Assembly in the Manhattan borough of New York, September 26 2016. (PHOTO: Reuters)

*Originally published in [The Jerusalem Post](#)*

Tanzania opened an embassy in Ramat Gan on Tuesday, the 15th

African state to open an embassy in Israel, and the fourth to open one in the last three years.

Tanzanian Foreign Minister Augustine Mahiga, on his first visit to Israel and the highest level visit here by a Tanzanian official, said the embassy signifies the importance his country attaches to its “renewed” friendship with Israel.

Tanzania established diplomatic ties with Israel in 1963, and – like most other African states – severed them under intense Arab pressure after the Yom Kippur War in 1973. The ties were re-established in 1995.

The election of President John Magufuli in 2015 led to a distinct uptick in ties between the two countries. Magufuli, a devout Christian, replaced his Muslim predecessor. When Netanyahu met Mahiga at a mini-summit with six African leaders at Entebbe in 2016, he received a promise that Tanzania would open an embassy in Israel.

Tanzania’s Ambassador to Israel Job D Masima took his position here nine months ago and has worked until now out of temporary offices.

Asked by The Jerusalem Post why Tanzania elected to open its embassy in Ramat Gan [instead of Jerusalem](#), Masima replied that the important thing was to open it somewhere inside Israel.

Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked, who attended the official opening of the Tanzanian Embassy and who visited that country two weeks ago, said at the ceremony that she hoped one day to see the Tanzanian flag fly in Jerusalem. She said Israel was grateful to Magufuli for opening the embassy and hoped the new embassy will signify an upgrade of Israeli-Tanzanian cooperation.

Israel does not have an embassy in Tanzania and is represented there by its embassy in Nairobi.

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# Iranian Christian converts sentenced to 10 years after losing appeal



*Originally published in [Premier Org](#)*

A court has rejected an appeal made on behalf of four Iranian Christian converts who were all charged with propagating house churches and promoting “Zionist Christianity”.

Yousef Nadarkhani, Mohammadreza Omidi, Yasser Mossayebzadeh and Saheb Fadaie were told that their 10-year sentences received on 6 July 2017 would remain unchanged.

However, Nadarkhani and Omidi have also been sentenced to two years internal exile in areas far away from their families.

Mossayebzadeh, Fadaie and Omidi faced separate charges for the consumption of wine as they were taking communion at the time of their arrest, and were sentenced to 80 lashes each in 2016.

Their appeal against this sentence remains outstanding.

On December 13 2017 all four defendants attended an appeal hearing at the Revolutionary Court in Tehran in front of two judges.

Christian charity Middle East Concern has urged Christians to

pray for “the Lord to comfort and encourage the four men and their families” and to pray “it will not be necessary for the four men to serve such harsh sentences”.

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## Archaeologists uncover ruins of ancient Christian hideout under town formerly held by ISIS



“This place is so special. Here is where I think the security guard would stand at the gate watching for any movement outside,”

*Originally published in [Faith Wire](#)*

The ancient ruins of a Christian refuge or early church dating as far back as the first centuries of the Roman Empire were recently discovered in Manbij, Syria. The area, which was formerly under ISIS control, managed to escape the attention of the terror group known for destroying churches and other

Christian artefacts of the regions they conquer.

ISIS invaded Manbij in 2014. During this time, Abdulwahab Sheko, head of the Exploration Committee at the Ruins Council in Manbij, was studying the area. In an interview with Fox News, Sheko noted that the site was lucky to have escaped the group's attention. He kept quiet about the ruins until 2016, when ISIS was driven out by the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

During their two-year occupation of the area, ISIS forces failed to notice the tip of an old gate on an empty mound of land where they dumped garbage. But Sheko explained that the gate, which ran several feet into the ground down, leads straight to the old Christian ruins.

"I was so excited, I can't describe it. I was holding everything in my hands," Sheko said of the discovery.

Several crosses etched into columns and walls, and writings carved into stone indicate that the underground ruin was a special place where persecuted Christians under the Roman Empire congregated.

"This place is so special. Here is where I think the security guard would stand at the gate watching for any movement outside," Sheko explained as he led reporters through the "first location" of the site. "He could warn the others to exit through the other passage if they needed to flee."

American archaeologist John Wineland told Fox that the discovery of this "secret church" could be crucial to understanding the lives of Christians under Roman rule.

"They indicate that there was a significant Christian population in the area which felt they needed to hide their activities," said Wineland, who is a professor of history and archaeology at South-eastern University. "This is probably an indication of the persecution by the Roman government, which



was common in the period.”

Sheko explained that due to the area being riddled with dangerous mines and booby traps, excavation of the site couldn't begin until late August last year. By March, however, Sheko and his team had uncovered enough artefacts to host “a festival” for locals to come and see the long-hidden treasure.

A recently discovered “second location” – which is still full of insects, trash and even a stray dog who made his home there – harbours an underground cave with “a multitude of rooms” containing “overt Christian symbols” that are “etched into the stone walls and across the arched ceilings.”

Sheko noted that it is believed this second location was added following a more widespread acceptance of Christianity in the region.

“We think this place after Christianity was no longer a secret anymore,” he explained, pointing to the symbols.

Wineland agreed, telling Fox that based on the photographs he's seen, “the crosses chiselled into the walls, along with geometric designs consistent with the Roman era, appear to have been added later, after wider acceptance of the Christian faith.”

The subterranean ruins also contain a “graveyard,” which Sheko explained was likely reserved for the church clergy. Each tomb contains an elevated “stone cushion” for the deceased's head.

Sheko added that there are many more potential ruins that have yet to be uncovered, but residential buildings located above them make the excavation process complicated.

The city of Manbij is located in north eastern Aleppo Governorate, near the Turkish border. It was once considered one of Syria's most ancient and prized townships, according to Fox. Archaeologists believe many more Christian sites could be

unearthed as ISIS loses ground in these areas.

“This has led to a significant decline of Christians in the region. Some have been killed, others have fled, and still others have been coerced into converting to Islam,” he said.

Sheko, who is Muslim, hopes his efforts to preserve the incredible historical relics will help to distinguish himself and others from the incredibly hostile ISIS Muslims.

“We are Muslim, but we are not like ISIS Muslims,” he said. “We take care of these Christian ruins. We respect them. We respect humanity.”