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## The Hagia Sophia

By Faisal Kutty

### **TURKEY CAN STILL SALVAGE THE HAGIA SOPHIA DECISION TO SHOWCASE THE TOLERANT FACE OF ISLAM**

In July of this year, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan turned back the Hagia Sophia museum in Istanbul - originally founded as a cathedral - into a mosque. The edict came after Turkey's highest administrative court ruled that the government can revoke an 80-year old decree making it a museum.

Turkish President Recep Erdoğan had promised last year that he would reconvert it to a mosque. He did not need the court approval but sought it as a way to gain "an aura of legitimacy" said Aykan Erdemir, former Turkish parliamentarian. The President made

the announcement within days of the court's ruling.

Completed in 537 AD, Hagia Sophia served as the home of the Eastern Orthodox Church for nearly 900 years with the exception of a brief tenure as a Catholic cathedral in the 13th Century during the Fourth Crusade. It also hosted all of the imperial ceremonies and was seen as the crown on the Byzantine city of Constantinople. After Fatih Sultan Mehmed II routed the Byzantines and ransacked the city in 1453, the Ottomans converted the church into a mosque.

The Ottomans added to the grandeur and majesty for the next 500 years, but they also defaced or plastered over Orthodox symbols and artwork. The Hagia Sophia served as the main mosque in the newly renamed city of Istanbul until completion of the



*The Hagia Sophia Grand Mosque, photographed in the 1890s before Atatürk turned it into a museum*

Blue Mosque in 1616. Its influence on the architecture of the mosques in the city and around the world is undeniable.

With the fall of the Ottoman Empire, its status changed again when the founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, closed religious institutions as part of his secularization drive. Religious buildings including the Hagia Sophia, were transformed into museums in 1934.

With the revival of Muslim religious identity in and the growth of political Islam in the latter half of the century, the calls to reconvert the Hagia Sophia back into a mosque began to be heard. In recent years, Turkish nationalists joined the religious and large groups began regularly demonstrating at the gates of the building every May 29, the anniversary of the Ottoman conquest. Some have gone as far as to claim that it is a holy site for Muslims akin to the mosques in Makkah, Medina, and Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem. The calls reached a fevered pitch at the end of

May, when the President opened a grand show featuring religious recitations and a light show to mark the 567th anniversary of the conquest. For the first time in 80 years, a qari recited the Qur'an—chapter titled the Conquest—inside the Hagia Sophia.

### **SHORT-SIGHTED DOMESTIC POLITICAL PLOY WITH LONG- TERM NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES**

A supporter of the cause in his youth, President Erdoğan remained quiet for the most part on the issue since coming to power and even publicly opposed the calls once, advising proponents to fill the Blue Mosque next door for prayers first. His position changed just before the March 2019 Istanbul municipal elections when polls predicted that his ruling Justice and Development (AK) Party would lose the city to the current mayor Ekrem Imamoglu. He told a rally at the time that the Hagia Sophia will be turned

into a mosque in response to President Donald Trump's support of Israel's designation of Jerusalem as its capital.

As Turkey watchers have observed, this appears to be nothing short of a political ploy to satisfy the majority of Turks who support the move, and to distract attention from the country's weakening economy and the pandemic. In fact, Ertuğrul Gunay, a former member of the President's cabinet, has openly accused the President of exploiting the issue for political ends. There may be some potential short term domestic political gains but in exchange for some long-term damage to both domestic and international relations.

The head of the Eastern Orthodox Church based in Istanbul, known as the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, condemned the move. The Church in Russia, home to the world's largest Orthodox Christian community, also made their objections known. The decision has also prompted international criticism, from religious and political leaders worldwide. The Greek Orthodox Church of the United States declared recently that it was petitioning the United Nations to pressure Turkey to protect Orthodox Christianity's cultural heritage following the conversion. The Church said that it was pressing UN special rapporteurs in the areas of cultural rights, minority rights, and freedom of religion and beliefs to hold Turkey accountable "for its deliberate policies to erase the cultural heritage of Orthodox Christians."

There is a strong basis to argue that a decision like Sultan Mehmet's initial decision to usurp the church is contrary to Islamic rules. The Prophet Muhammed in his rules of engagement made it clear that places of worship were not to be disturbed in war. Clearly, taking over an existing church after victory goes well beyond disturbing.

In fact, this also goes against the precedent set by the second caliph of Islam, Umar ibn al-Khattab. According to historians Edward Gibbons and Ibn Khaldun, in 638 after Sophronius, the Patriarch of Jerusalem, surrendered Jerusalem to Umar, when time for the afternoon prayers arrived, Sophronius invited Umar to pray in the rebuilt Church of the

Holy Sepulchre. Umar declined, and prayed outside the church. Upon finishing, the Caliph reportedly informed the Patriarch that he did not pray in the church because he feared that Muslims may claim the church in the future as a mosque because of his prayer.

Proponents had attracted widespread support by framing the issue as one of national sovereignty and not one of human rights, cultural rights, international norms or even religious rights.

"This decision is a national matter. International players should not get involved," said Ozturk Yilmaz, who is also a former member of the Turkey's main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), which was established as a pro-secular party by Atatürk.

Athens has been a vocal opponent and wrote UNESCO about the proposed change. The interference by a sworn enemy had served to consolidate support across the political spectrum. With Erdoğan even asking how Greece could dictate what Turkey did in this context when Greece has limited mosques in the country.

The fact remains that this is not an exclusive domestic issue. The site is now one of Turkey's most visited tourist attractions attracting 3.7 million visitors a year and contains invaluable medieval mosaics, including depictions of Christ, the Virgin Mary, John the Baptist, and other rare portraits and artefacts. The 1,500-year-old iconic, domed building sitting in Istanbul's Fatih district, on the west bank of the Bosphorus is a UNESCO World Heritage site. UNESCO deputy director Ernesto Ottone Ramirez says a letter was sent to Turkish authorities advising them that the Convention on World Cultural Heritage required approval from a UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee before any steps can be taken.

The first Jumua or Friday Prayers in 80 years in the facility took place on July 24th. A better solution—still possible—would have seen the structure maintained as a museum co-existence and adding separate dedicated spaces for Muslims and Christians to pray. Such a museum would not only be a much needed symbol of co-existence but would have also offered President Erdoğan a diplomatic solution to appease his domestic base.

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