

US Amb-at-Large for Int'l Religious Freedom: 'We call on government of Turkey to maintain it as a UNESCO World Heritage site'



The US administration is the latest international party to issue a statement regarding the status of the iconic Hagia Sophia, with Sam Brownback, the US Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, taking to Twitter to stress that “...The Hagia Sophia holds enormous spiritual and cultural significance to billions of believers of different faiths around the world. We call on the government of Turkey to maintain it as a UNESCO World Heritage site and to maintain accessibility to all — in its current status as a museum.”

The very high-profile statement by the relevant US ambassador comes after the annual US State Department report on religious freedoms in the world paints a particularly negative picture for religious minorities in Turkey.

At the same time, Greek Culture Minister Lina Mendoni this week dispatched a letter to the representatives of UNESCO member-states, underlining the significance of the Hagia Sophia retaining its ecumenical character, rather than being reconverted into a mosque by the current Erdogan government.

The Patriarchal cathedral in Constantinople for nearly a millennium, the Hagia Sophia was violently converted into a so-called “conquest mosque” when the imperial metropolis was overrun by the Ottoman Turks after a two-month siege in May 1453.

It was transformed into a museum in the mid 1930s by a strictly secular government in Turkey, although demands to reconvert the UNESCO World Heritage Monument back into a mosque have intensified over the past decade, mainly by Islamist groups and politicians.