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Greek American Policy-Makers alert White House of danger Hagia Sophia turns into a mosque



Greek-American policy-makers are raising with the US Administration the possibility that Turkey could turn the emblematic Hagia Sophia church in Constantinople, a universal symbol of religious tolerance of all faiths, to a mosque.

Speaking to *Greek Reporter*, Congressman Gus Bilirakis and Christos Marafatsos, Vice-Chair of National Diversity Coalition for Trump, say that there is a real threat that Turkish President Erdogan would change Hagia Sophia's status as a museum and a UNESCO World Heritage site.

"We have to take this very seriously. I spoke to the President last year, on Air Force One, in regard to this issue. (Erdogan) has made this threat before and I wanted to educate the President about the meaning of Hagia Sophia and the status quo at that point," Bilirakis said.

The longtime Florida representative says since then he has repeatedly spoken to President Trump and Vice President Pence, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and members of the National Security Council as well as Ambassador Sam Brownback, the Ambassador of Religious Freedom, regarding the “serious threat” regarding Hagia Sophia’s purported reconversion into a mosque.

“We bring this up all the time,” he stated, adding that he also speaks regularly to members of the Foreign Affairs Committee on the subject.

Bilirakis noted last week’s intervention by Brownback who urged Turkey to abandon plans to reconvert the 6th century monument of Hagia Sophia into a mosque. “The Hagia Sophia holds enormous spiritual & cultural significance to billions of believers of different faiths around the world,” Brownback said in a tweet on Thursday.

“We call on the Govt of Turkey to maintain it as a UNESCO World Heritage site & to maintain accessibility to all in its current status as a museum,” the ambassador added.

Turkey’s Council of State is currently examining the request for annulment of a 1934 cabinet decree which turned Hagia Sophia, once Christendom’s largest cathedral, from a mosque into a secular museum.

The court is expected to announce its decision on the status of Hagia Sophia in early July as to whether or not the site should be converted into a mosque once again.

Bilirakis recalls his last visit to Hagia Sophia in 2019: “We had tears in our eyes as we walked in. It’s an incredible place, so beautiful.

“When I went there I could see the defaced icons. At this point if we could just get it to remain a museum.... I’m advocating for that at this point. For the first 1,000 years it was the largest Christian church in the world. So this impacts all Christians,” he told *Greek Reporter*.

Bilirakis notes that because Erdogan is so unpredictable, and also because Turkey is amid an economic crisis, he wants to drum up support from Islamists in his country.

The Representative, who serves as the co-chair of the US Congress’ Religious Freedom Caucus, says “I told the President, and he seemed to agree, that there is

no real religious freedom in Turkey.”

Bilirakis maintains that President Trump is now “well-versed” regarding the meaning of Hagia Sophia to all Orthodox Christians, and he heaps praise on Trump, saying he is “very strong regarding religious freedom.”

The Representative added that he routinely receives letters from people of every religious denomination supporting maintaining of Hagia Sophia as a museum and against the possibility of it being turned into a mosque.

“Even Turkish Americans have testified before our caucus in favor of our cause”, he relates. “I am doing everything I can as part of the Hellenic Caucus and the Caucus for Religious Freedom. We’re not going to take for granted that he’s not going to do it.”

Christos Marafatsos, Vice-Chair of National Diversity Coalition for Trump, issued a statement on Hagia Sophia calling upon Turkey and Turkish President Erdogan to abandon its attempts to convert it into a mosque.

Marafatsos tells *Greek Reporter* that he is following up with conversations with senior members of the White House, advisors to the President, and representatives of Congress this week.

“The National Diversity Coalition for Trump calls upon Turkey and Turkish President Erdogan to abandon its attempts to convert the Hagia Sophia Cathedral into a mosque and to preserve its status as a museum and a UNESCO World Heritage site – A universal symbol of religious tolerance of ALL faiths,” the statement reads.

“In response to the Executive Order on Advancing International Religious Freedom signed by President Trump on June 2nd, 2020, we applaud President Trump and his administrations’ quick response to call upon Turkey to preserve Hagia Sophia’s ‘enormous spiritual & cultural significance to billions of believers of different faiths around the world’.”

The National Diversity Coalition for President Trump will continue to advocate on behalf of Hagia Sophia and against the persecution of Christians in Turkey and the worldwide oppression of religious freedoms for all faiths, the statement adds.

“As leaders of communities of faith and long time advisors to President Trump, we vigorously support maintaining the Hagia Sophia UNESCO World Heritage site as an ecumenical museum accessible to people of ALL faiths,” the statement concludes.

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