

Patriarch Warns Christian-Muslim Clash Over Aghia Sophia's Status



Ecumenical Patriarch Vartholomaïos said if Turkey turns the ancient revered Orthodox Cathedral of Aghia Sophia in Constantinople into a mosque it could pit Christians against Muslims again, 567 years after the city that is now called Istanbul fell to Ottoman invaders.

[The Orthodoxia news agency](#) said the spiritual leader of the Greek Orthodox Church was speaking to a congregation at a church in the city when he expressed his worry over the plans set forth by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to turn the UNESCO World Heritage site, one of the most important monuments of the Orthodox world, into a mosque.

“The potential conversion of Aghia Sophia into a mosque will turn millions of Christians around the world against Islam,” Vartholomaïos warned. “We hope that wisdom and reason ultimately prevail,” he added, the report said.

He called on Turks to support keeping the cathedral as a museum as it is now designated, saying it brings together people and cultures from all over the world,

the site one of the most popular in the city, drawing about three million tourists annually.

The United States Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback jumped in to join Greek Culture Minister Lina Mendoni in urging Turkey not to make the conversion into a mosque even though there have been minarets placed outside it for centuries.

“The Aghia Sophia holds enormous spiritual and cultural significance to billions of believers of different faiths around the world,” Brownback said, reported Kathimerini.

“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 ambassador added.

That followed a letter that Mendoni sent to representatives of UNESCO member-states informing them of Turkey’s plans to turn the monument into a mosque even though it has been a museum since the 1934.

It had become a mosque after Constantinople, which the rest of the world except Greece calls Istanbul, fell in 1453, but was designated a museum by the founder of modern secular Turkey Mustafa Kemal Ataturk.

“Aghia Sophia must not be allowed to be divested of its universal character and turned into a Muslim place of worship,” Mendoni wrote, the paper said, as she said the 6th Century monument was bequeathed to humanity in 1934 when Ataturk passed a decree converting it into a museum.

“What the Turkish government and President Erdogan are attempting to do today revives and reignites fanatical nationalist and religious sentiment. It is an attempt to reduce the monument’s value and international radiance,” warned Mendoni.

She accused the Turkish government of exploiting the site for political expediency and of bringing the 15th Century into the 21st Century, as Erdogan has been cranking up the heat on Greece with violations of Greek airspace and waters by fighter jets and warships and planning to drill for energy off Crete.

Mendonni added reconverting Aghia Sophia into a mosque would also require the approval of UNESCO, which listed the site as a monument of world heritage in 1985. Turkey, she said, signed the UNESCO Convention in 1972 and would be in violation of the agreement by making such a move without approval, although

Erdogan has violated other treaties he doesn't recognize but then invoking to them to Turkey's advantage when needed.

All the calls have been in vain, however, as Turkey showed earlier when the United States urged the status of Aghia Sophia not be changed, with still Erdogan wanting his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) party to go along with it.

AKP said a survey it conducted found 90 percent of AKP and nationalist MHP voters, 70 percent of right-wing IYI Party voters and 40 percent of the Kemalist main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) voters want Aghia Sophia to be a mosque, said Kathimerini.

Turkey's Council of State was expected to issue its ruling on July 2 with Greece's ruling New Democracy watching developments over the church.

Erdogan told government officials to study how to change the status. "Aghia Sophia can continue to be visited by tourists as a mosque, as is Sultanahmet [the Blue Mosque]. Our nation should decide on this," Erdogan was quoted by Turkey's Hurriyet telling officials of his AKP party's central executive board.

"Do a study for Aghia Sophia, let's evaluate and talk," he reportedly told officials, warning them to "be very sensitive" about the issue without clarifying what that meant although his intentions have long been well known.

On May 29, Imams recited verses of the Koran inside the cathedral to mark the anniversary of the conquest of the city.

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