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Turkey's high court defers decision on Hagia Sophia conversion handed back to Erdogan; US calls for iconic cathedral to remain a museum



Turkey's highest administrative court has essentially handed the decision of whether or not to change the status of the iconic Hagia Sophia to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, with Council of State justices failing to issue a definitive ruling on the sensitive matter.

Erdogan, along with several of his top ministers and religious extremists in the predominately Muslim country have threatened and pressed for a reconversion of the Hagia Sophia into a mosque, thereby changing its current status as Turkey's most visited museum and a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Members of the high court merely ruled that decisions taken in 2008 were legal, as was a landmark 1934 ministerial decision transforming the greatest of all cathedrals in eastern Christendom for nearly a millennium into a museum.

At the same time, the high court said the Hagia Sophia's status can be altered with a simple presidential decree.

The prosecutor to the high court, in his recommendation, called on justices to reject the motion.

The petition before the court was filed by an extremist group devoted to reverting Hagia Sophia into a mosque. The group demands an annulment of a 1934 decision by the Council of Ministers, led by secular Turkey's founder Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, which turned the historic structure into a museum, claiming Kemal's signature was forged.

The indirect but inflammatory effort by the Erdogan administration to reconvert the Hagia Sophia into a so-called "conquest mosque" has generated high-profile opposition and reaction around the world.

A statement issued by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo this week warned against any change in the status of the Hagia Sophia, a position that drew an angry response by Ankara.

Pompeo's statement read: "We urge the government of Turkey to continue to maintain the Hagia Sophia as a museum, as an exemplar of its commitment to respect the faith traditions and diverse history that contributed to the Republic of Turkey, and to ensure it remains accessible to all...The United States views a change in the status of the Hagia Sophia as diminishing the legacy of this remarkable building and its unsurpassed ability - so rare in the modern world—to serve humanity as a much-needed bridge between those of differing faith traditions and cultures."

In a response, Turkish Foreign Ministry spokesman Hami Aksoy said: "We are shocked at the statement made by the US State Department on Hagia Sophia... which is situated on our land, is the property of Turkey, like all our cultural assets."

According to reports in Turkey's pro-government press, which now dominate practically all print and electronic media in that country, a first Muslim prayer may be held in the Hagia Sophia on July 15, the day before the anniversary of a failed coup in that country in 2016, assuming that Erdogan issues a presidential decree in that direction.