

## **Turkey's top administrative court repeals 1934 decree turning Hagia Sophia into museum**



Turkey's top administrative court on Friday annulled the 1934 government decree that turned Hagia Sophia into museum. The long-awaited ruling opens the way for Istanbul's iconic Hagia Sophia to be used as a mosque.

The Hagia Sophia, one of the world's most important historical and cultural heritage sites, was built in the sixth century during the reign of the Byzantine Empire and served as the seat of the Greek Orthodox Church. It was converted into an imperial mosque with the Ottoman conquest of Istanbul in 1453. The structure was converted into a museum during the strictly secular single-party rule in 1935, but there have been discussions about converting it back to a mosque, with public demand to restore it as a place of worship gaining traction on social media.

"The issue of Hagia Sophia's statute is an internal affair of Turkey and its right of sovereignty," Cengiz Tomar, rector of Ahmet Yesevi University told Daily Sabah. "It was turned into a museum through a Cabinet decree and can once again turn into

a mosque with a decree. However, since there will be both internal and external reactions, in response the government would have wanted to support the legality of the decision with a high court legal opinion.”

While some groups have long been pressing for the structure, which they regard as a Muslim Ottoman legacy, to be converted back into a mosque, others believe the UNESCO World Heritage site should remain a museum, as a symbol of Christian and Muslim solidarity.

Amid the international reactions over the status of Hagia Sophia, Ankara says that the issue is a domestic affair.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said last week that accusations being made against Turkey regarding the Hagia Sophia directly target the country’s sovereignty.

“Whether positive or negative, this decision is the right of the government and has significant support from the people. The issue of Hagia Sophia has left deep traces in the minds of the Turkish people just as the execution of (former Prime Minister Adnan) Menderes and this trauma has to be resolved,” Tomar added.

There has been criticism over the move in some circles, with the U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo issuing a statement last week urging the Turkish government of keeping its status as a museum.

The Turkish president noted that there are 435 churches and synagogues in Turkey where Christian and Jews can pray.

Reopening Istanbul’s Hagia Sophia for prayers will not deprive it of its identity, as it will always belong to the world’s historical heritage, Ibrahim Kalin, Turkey’s presidential spokesperson, told Anadolu Agency (AA) on Thursday.

Opening Hagia Sophia to prayer, as Turkish leaders have expressed interest in doing, will not hinder people visiting it, he said, adding that “Turkey will still preserve the Christian icons there, just like our ancestors preserved all Christian values.”

“All of our major mosques such as the Blue Mosque, Fatih and Suleymaniye Mosques, they are open to both visitors and worshippers,” Kalin said, further citing the examples of France’s iconic Notre Dame Cathedral and Sacre-Coeur Basilica, world-famous churches which are open to both tourists and worshippers.

“Opening up Hagia Sophia to worship doesn’t keep local or foreign tourists from visiting the site,” Kalin stressed, “So a loss from the world’s heritage is not in

question.”

In 2015, a cleric recited the Quran inside the building for the first time in 85 years. The following year, Turkey’s religious authority began hosting and broadcasting religious readings during the holy month of Ramadan and the call to prayer was recited inside on the anniversary of the first revelation of the Quran to the Prophet Muhammad.

Another source of criticism has been Greece, upon which Turkey stated that Athens, the only remaining European country without a mosque in its capital, being disturbed by the recital of the Holy Quran in Hagia Sophia is a case in point illustrating the intolerant psychology of this country.

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