

Western world aghast at Erdogan decision to convert Hagia Sophia basilica back into Muslim mosque



International public opinion along with world leaders and institutions continued to express dismay and bewilderment over yesterday's announcement, made Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan himself, reconverting the iconic Hagia Sophia back into a mosque.

Although the authoritarian and Islamist-leaning Erdogan and his top ministers had repeatedly threatened over recent years to change the status of the emblematic 6th-century monument, the ominous development nevertheless came as a shock to the Christian world, especially Orthodoxy and its hundreds of millions of believers around the world.

The greatest of all cathedrals of eastern Christendom was the seat of Orthodoxy for nearly a millennium, before the Muslim Ottoman Turks sacked Constantinople in May 1453.

It was subsequently converted by the conquering Ottomans into a so-called "imperial mosque", only to be turned into a museum by modern Turkey's founder,

Kemal Ataturk, and his staunchly secular administration in 1934.

Erdogan ignored a cascade of warnings by political leaders and Church primates in converting the UNESCO World Heritage site back into a mosque, nearly nine decades after having served as Turkey's most visited museum and as its pre-eminent monument.

In a nationwide address and in a bid to deflect a chorus of condemnation against him, Erdogan said the Hagia Sophia – which means Holy Wisdom in Greek – will be open to all, locals and visitors, Muslims and non-Muslims.

Greek leadership deplores decision

As expected Greece's political leadership deplored the decision, as the Hagia Sophia holds enormous symbolic significance for the predominately Orthodox nation to the west of Turkey.



Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis on Friday expressed his government's stern disapproval of the decision; only hours after a high court in Turkey annulled the landmark 1934 ministerial decree by Ataturk's administration.

Mitsotakis said "...This decision – coming 85 years after it was declared a museum – is an insult to its ecumenical character. It also constitutes an option that also insults all those who recognize the monument as part of world culture ... it affects not only Turkey's relations with Greece, but those with the European Union,

UNESCO, and the global community as a whole.”

The Greek Premier, who was on the Ionian island of Corfu on Saturday, spoke by phone with the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, His All Holiness Bartholomew I, to whom he expressed his undivided solidarity and support.



Similarly, **Greece’s president of the Republic, Katerina Sakellaropoulou**, said the decision by the Erdogan government will irreparably undermine the values of tolerance and inter-faith dialogue, while also severely harming Ankara’s relations with Athens, the EU and the entire international community.



Former prime minister and the current main opposition leader, Alexis Tsipras, was also scathing in his criticism, referring to a serious provocation that violates universal values and undermines inter-faith dialogue.



Culture minister Mendoni: ‘Erdogan takes his country six centuries back in time’
Greek culture minister Lina Mendoni, a respected archaeologist, warned that “...the

type of nationalism displayed by Erdogan...takes his country six centuries back in time.”

EU reaction

In a first reaction at the European Union level, the **High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell**, called the decision is “regrettable”.

In a statement, he said: “...Hagia Sophia has a strong symbolic, historical and universal value...The ruling by the Turkish Council of State to overturn one of modern Turkey’s landmark decisions, and President Erdogan’s decision to place the monument under the management of the Religious Affairs Presidency is regrettable.”



Ecumenical Patriarchate, Archdioceses of Australia and America decry decision

The first reaction by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, which for nearly a millennium had its seat at the Hagia Sophia, was by the **Metropolitan of Myron, His Eminence Chrystostomos, who told the *Orthodoxia News Agency*** that sadness and grief were prevalent at the Patriarchate at the moment.



Halfway around the world, the Archbishop of Australia, His Eminence Makarios, called the decision by the Islamist Erdogan as craven, hate-filled and smacking of religious fanaticism.



Speaking to the *Orthodoxia News Agency*, His Eminence said this action will go down in history with black letters, as it not only does injustice to history, truth, the ethnic Greeks of Constantinople and the Orthodox world, but also to the people of Turkey and their future.

He added "...this also shows a type of disrespect to the memory of the founder of the Turkish republic, Kemal Ataturk".



In New York City, the Archdiocese of America issued a plea to the Turkish government to reverse, even now, its decision to change the status of the Hagia Sophia, and to show respect to a sacred spiritual center for Christians around the world.

State Department, French reax

In other international reactions, the US State Department on Friday it was “disappointed” by the decision to convert the Hagia Sophia into a mosque.

A state department spokesman said: “..We are disappointed by the decision by the Government of Turkey to change the status of the Hagia Sophia. This building is an important part of the ‘Historic Sites of Istanbul’ UNESCO World Heritage Site, in recognition of its rich multicultural history.”



In Paris, **French Foreign Minister Jean Le Drian** underlined, in a statement, that “...France expresses regret over the decision of the Turkish Council of State on changing the status of the Hagia Sophia cathedral museum as well as the decree of President Erdogan on transferring it under the control of the Directorate of Religious Affairs.”

Russian Church: Turkey appears to be ignoring millions of Christians

In another part of the world, the Russian Church’s **Metropolitan of Volokolamsk, His Eminence Hilarion**, was quoted by the news agency *Ria Novosti* as saying that the Turkish decision appears as a conscientious attempt to create tension in relations between religions.



Hilarion stated that “...For Orthodox Christians Hagia Sophia remains hallowed ground of global significance; its conversion into a mosque will have a negative reaction, among others, in Russia.”

The Moscow Patriarchate had previously said that Turkey appears to be ignoring “millions of Christians” by changing the status of the Hagia Sophia.

UNESCO

The UN’s respected UNESCO said it deeply regrets the decision of the Turkish authorities, made without prior discussion.



UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay said "... the Hagia Sophia is an architectural masterpiece and a unique testimony to interactions between Europe and Asia over the centuries. Its status as a museum reflects the universal nature of its heritage, and makes it a powerful symbol for dialogue."

Finally, the **president of the St. Maximus the Greek Institution of Athens, prof. Evangelos Chrysos, referred** to the devastation brought upon a sacred symbol of Orthodoxy from the annulment of the 1934 decree, while point to political and cultural repercussions for Turkish leadership.

