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“The decision to convert Hagia Sophia into a mosque will make life more difficult for Christians here”



Persecution of Christians in Turkey: the full statement of the Order of Saint Andrew the Apostle, Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, is here. The Turkish government's decision to convert Hagia Sophia to a mosque was not a courageous act, but a deeply ill-advised act of memoricide that ignores Turkey's rich Christian history and further threatens the religious freedom of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the remaining Christians of that land. It was undertaken in defiance of the United States, Russia, France, Greece and many others.

For previous ChristianPersecution.com coverage of the persecution of Christians in Turkey, see here.

“Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan formally makes Hagia Sophia a mosque,” Associated Press, July 10, 2020:

ANKARA, Turkey — The president of Turkey on Friday formally converted Istanbul's sixth-century Hagia Sophia back into a mosque and declared it open for Muslim worship, hours after a high court annulled a 1934 decision that had made the religious landmark a museum.

The decision sparked deep dismay among Orthodox Christians. Originally a cathedral, Hagia Sophia was turned into a mosque after Istanbul's conquest by the Ottoman Empire but had been a museum for the last 86 years, drawing millions of tourists annually.

There was jubilation outside the terracotta-hued structure with its cascading domes and four minarets. Dozens of people awaiting the court's ruling chanted "Allah is great!" when the news broke. A large crowd later prayed outside it.

In the capital of Ankara, legislators stood and applauded as the decision was read in Parliament.

Turkey's high administrative court threw its weight behind a petition brought by a religious group and annulled the 1934 Cabinet decision that turned the site into a museum. Within hours, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan signed a decree handing over Hagia Sophia to Turkey's Religious Affairs Presidency.

In a televised address to the nation, Erdogan said the first prayers inside Hagia Sofia would be held on July 24, and he urged respect for the decision.

"I underline that we will open Hagia Sophia to worship as a mosque by preserving its character of humanity's common cultural heritage," he said, adding: "It is Turkey's sovereign right to decide for which purpose Hagia Sofia will be used."

He rejected the idea that the decision ends Hagia Sophia's status as a structure that brings faiths together.

"Like all of our other mosques, the doors of Hagia Sophia will be open to all, locals or foreigners, Muslims and non-Muslims," Erdogan said....

Vladimir Dzhubarov, deputy head of the foreign affairs committee in the Russian upper house of parliament, called the action "a mistake."

"Turning it into a mosque will not do anything for the Muslim world. It does not bring nations together, but on the contrary brings them into collision," he said.

The debate hits at the heart of Turkey's religious-secular divide. Nationalist and conservative groups in Turkey have long yearned to hold prayers at Hagia Sophia, which they regard as part of the Muslim Ottoman legacy. Others believe it should remain a museum, as a symbol of Christian and Muslim solidarity.

"It was a structure that brought together both Byzantine and Ottoman histories,"

said Zeynep Kizildag, a 27-year-old social worker, who did not support the conversion. "The decision to turn it into a mosque is like erasing 1,000 years of history, in my opinion."

Garo Paylan, an ethnic Armenian member of Turkey's Parliament tweeted that it was "a sad day for Christians (and) for all who believe in a pluralist Turkey."

"The decision to convert Hagia Sophia into a mosque will make life more difficult for Christians here and for Muslims in Europe," he wrote. "Hagia Sophia was a symbol of our rich history. Its dome was big enough for all."...

The Istanbul-based Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, considered the spiritual leader of the world's Orthodox Christians, warned last month that the building's conversion into a mosque "will turn millions of Christians across the world against Islam."

On Friday, Archbishop Elpidophoros of America said the decision runs counter to the vision of secular Turkey's founder, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk "who understood that Hagia Sophia should serve all Turkey's people and indeed the whole world."

"The days of conquest should remain a closed chapter of our collective histories," he told The Associated Press, adding that Turkey's government "can still choose wisely" but letting Hagia Sophia remain a "monument to all civilizations and universal values."...

Some Islamic prayers have been held in the museum in recent years. In a major symbolic move, Erdogan recited the opening verse of the Quran there in 2018....

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