

## **Stern EU condemnation of Erdogan decision to convert Hagia Sophia into mosque**



European Union Foreign ministers on Monday categorically condemned a decision by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to reconvert the iconic Hagia Sophia back to a mosque, with an announcement stating that this ominous development will “...inevitably fuel mistrust, promote renewed divisions between religious communities and undermine efforts at dialogue and cooperation.”

The now unabashedly authoritarian and pro-Islamist Erdogan has dismissed widespread international condemnation over a Turkish high court’s annulment of a landmark 1934 decree, which turned the Hagia Sophia into a museum, and his own snap decision, only hours later, to change the status of the 6th century Byzantine monument – the greatest of all cathedrals of eastern Christendom – back into a mosque.

Monday’s meeting in Brussels was the first physical get-together of EU foreign ministers since the coronavirus pandemic erupted.

Turkey, a predominately Sunni Muslim country, a NATO member and a perennial EU candidate state, topped the agenda of the 27-nation bloc, with member-states’ foreign ministers reaching a consensus – whereby EU-Turkey relations are currently under strain because of “...worrying developments affecting the EU’s interests.”

The Union’s foreign ministers also called for an end to illegal and unilateral drilling

by Turkey in the eastern Mediterranean, while calling on the Turkish government to contribute actively to a political solution in war-torn Libya and to respect its commitments, such as respecting a weapons embargo.

## **Borrell: Decision will undermine dialogue, cooperation**

The EU's top diplomat also lashed out at Turkey for the conversion of the Hagia Sophia, a UNESCO World Heritage site, into mosque, saying the move will fuel religious tensions.

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell told reporters in Brussels after the meeting that "...There was a broad support to call on the Turkish authorities to urgently reconsider and reverse this decision."

He added that the shocking act, considered by many faithful and Churches around the world as an insult to Christianity, will undermine dialogue and cooperation, echoing the position by the EU's foreign ministers.

According to a dispatch by Bloomberg, relations between the EU and Turkey have been deteriorating since Erdogan responded to a failed coup attempt almost four years ago to the day – on July 15, 2016 — with a widespread crackdown on his political opponents.

## **Provocations, saber-rattling by Ankara detailed**

The same article reminds that ties between Europe and Erdogan's administration further soured with a series of provocations and sabre-rattling by Ankara, including the illegal hydrocarbon exploration off the eastern Mediterranean island of Cyprus, Ankara's military intervention on the side of jihadis and insurgents in northern Syria, as well as a preposterous maritime-boundary accord with the Tripoli-based government of Libya – the side that Turkey supports in the Libyan civil war.

The Greek side, represented by Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias, proposed a new list of sanctions to be imposed on Ankara and Turkish officials in case violations and provocations continue by the Turkish side.

## **Glorious mosaics, frescoes to be covered during Muslim prayers**

At the same time in Turkey itself, state officials now plan to use lights and curtains during Muslim services, to cover the Hagia Sophia's glorious mosaics and frescoes, as Islam forbids the display of images of the human figure in mosques.

The mosaics and frescoes will be uncovered following the prayers' conclusion,

Turkey's head of religious affairs, Ali Erbaş, said during a television appearance over the weekend. He also said a grand Muslim celebration, as he called it, is scheduled for July 24, as promised by Erdogan in his announcement of the conversion last Friday.

The Hagia Sophia is the fourth Byzantine-era cathedral-turned museum that Erdogan has restored as a mosque during his time in power; with his domestic opponents saying the latest inflammatory decision is a blatant attempt to regain political popularity among his nationalist and deeply religious grassroots supporters.