

Erdogan, Islamist govt aim to erase, hide all vestiges of Christianity in Hagia Sophia



The tragic saga of the Hagia Sophia's conversion into a mosque by the now unabashedly Islamist government of Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan continued this week, with his spokesman over the weekend confirming that heavy curtains will cover the glorious frescoes and mosaics of the 6th century Orthodox Cathedral during Muslim prayers.

Work is continuing on the greatest of all cathedrals of eastern Christendom, after Erdogan signed a decree earlier this month ordering the conversion, and after the country's highest court deferred to him by striking down a landmark 1934 ministerial decision. The latter was signed by modern Turkey's secular founder, Kemal Ataturk, and had changed the status of the mosque from a so-called imperial mosque into museum.

The shocking move has generated widespread international condemnation, including from neighboring Greece, although Erdogan, unsanctioned by the European Union for continued provocations in the wider region, appears unmoved by the international fallout.

Turkish officials had said that the Christian-themed mosaics would be concealed

with either curtains or special lightning when the first Muslim prayers are scheduled to be held on July 24.

In an interview with a local broadcaster, Turkish presidential spokesman Ibrahim Kalin said some mosaics of the Virgin Mary and Archangel Gabriel, which are positioned in the direction where Muslims face during prayer, would be covered with curtains.

He said other mosaics of the Lord Savior Jesus Christ and other Christian saints did not pose an obstacle for Muslim prayers, because they are not located in this direction, but failed to mention if they would be permanently covered in order to remove any visible traces of Christianity.

Erdogan himself toured the UNESCO World Heritage Site on July 19 to review the conversion work, while several hundred of his supporters were assembled outside, ostensibly in a bid to portray his outrageous decision as backed by public opinion.

Greek FM

In again expressing Athens' heightened criticism of the move to reconvert the emblematic Orthodox basilica back into a mosque, Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias referred to an offensive action on the part of Turkey to alter the monument's universal character.

In a local interview, he added that Greece is "... facing a stepped up aggressiveness on the part of Turkey, one in complete opposition to international law, the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and good-neighborly relations... but with the offensive decision to alter the Hagia Sophia's status, Turkey moved even a step further, provoking the entire international community."

In a related development, the Archbishop of America, His Eminence Elpidophoros, was also quoted in a newspaper interview as saying "...now we have to wonder what the re-conversion of Hagia Sophia signals for the future of all minorities in Turkey. Diversity is strength, not weakness."

The Archbishop said that "...I hope that our community, the Omogenia here in the Diaspora, takes this heartbreak to heart. We need vigilance and advocacy, at a level we have never imagined," a reference to the Greek-American community in the United States.