



Erdoğan's "Holy Wisdom" — Why He Is Converting Hagia Sophia into a Mosque

by Dr. Efrat Aviv

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,646, July 16, 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: On July 10, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan declared that Istanbul's famed Hagia Sophia, which was a Christian cathedral for centuries, then a mosque, and is now a museum, will be converted back into a mosque. This move was not motivated by religious fervor. It was a calculated political act that conforms to Erdoğan's broader agenda.

Constantinople's Hagia Sophia Cathedral (the name translates to "holy wisdom") was built in 537 CE by Byzantine Emperor Justinian I. It is an architectural marvel with three domes that are not supported by any visible pillars.

Hagia Sophia was enormously significant for the Greek-Orthodox Church in the Byzantine era and continues to be so today. In 1453, Mehmet II conquered Constantinople and turned the church into a mosque as a symbolic act. In 1934, the government of the Turkish republic—which had been established the preceding decade by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk—converted the mosque into a museum in line with its secularist policy. Hagia Sophia served as such until July 2020, when President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan declared that it would be converted back into a mosque.

Conflict over Hagia Sophia is by no means new. Religious-conservative circles in Turkey objected to the site's conversion into a museum immediately upon the museum's opening in 1935. It took time, however, for opposition to the site's status to coalesce. That finally occurred in 1965, when the Justice Party (Adalet Partisi) was elected into office.

The push to convert Hagia Sophia back into a mosque gained wide publicity in right wing/conservative journalism of the time thanks to the religious

leanings of the Justice Party's chairman, Süleyman Demirel. The increase in interest also reflected a shift in Turkish foreign affairs and a tightening of ties with Arab states that occurred in the 1960s.

That period provoked wider discussion on the status of Hagia Sophia because of the Turkish-Greek conflict that arose that decade. The demand to return the cathedral to its mosque status took on symbolic weight as an act of defiance toward the "Hellenic enemy" that had taken over Cyprus. Even today, the tense relations between Turkey and Greece are perceived by many Turks and Greeks as somehow linked to the Hagia Sophia conflict.

Just as Hagia Sophia Mosque is a religious symbol for Turkish Muslims, Hagia Sophia Cathedral is a deeply meaningful symbol for Greek Orthodox Christians. According to Christian legend, when enemy forces breach the gates of Constantinople and all appears lost, the archangel Gabriel will descend with a sword of fire to save the city. Another Christian legend describes a priest who entered one of Hagia Sophia's pillars holding the sacramental bread and vanished, never to be seen again.

On July 11, Erdoğan posted a video on Twitter in which he argued that the resurrection of Hagia Sophia as a mosque was of value to the entire Muslim world, from "Bukhara to Andalusia," and was analogous to the "liberation" of the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, the Turkish minister of foreign affairs, claims that Greece has no business complaining as it is the only state in Europe whose capital, which contains a quarter million Muslims, has no official mosque.

The religious element is directly connected to domestic cultural discourse in Turkey. To Turks who do not support Erdoğan, his turning the Hagia Sophia museum back into a mosque constitutes a flagrant rebuff of Atatürk and his secularist legacy. As expressed by Turkish journalist Cemal Göktaş, the first thing to be done during the first Friday prayer recited in Hagia Sophia after the announcement will be a reading of the Fatiha sura—which is recited at the end of the Muslim burial service—for secularism in Turkey.

Erdoğan's declaration is meant to serve as a national boost at a time when Turkey is in an extremely precarious political and fiscal position. The Turkish economy has suffered serious deterioration, in part due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Turkey has waded into the Syrian quagmire, it has the Kurdish problem to contend with, it is conducting risky adventures in Libya, and it is stirring unrest in the Eastern Mediterranean. In Erdoğan's view, turning Hagia Sophia back into a mosque is a Turkish victory and a source of national pride during a time of great turmoil.

An important element to consider with regard to this issue is sovereignty. Turkey does not need another mosque. It already has a great many. Just a year ago, Erdoğan inaugurated the Çamlica Mosque on the Asian side of Istanbul—a huge complex designed to accommodate more than 60,000 worshippers per day. Furthermore, Hagia Sophia could have been opened to Islamic worshippers by decree. Indeed, official Muslim prayers have already taken place at the museum.

Not all religious movements in Turkey support the turning of the museum into a mosque, which proves that Hagia Sophia is more than a religious matter. Some groups claim that while “the right of possession by the sword” grants the legitimacy to turn Hagia Sophia into a mosque, it also allows non-Muslim states to legitimize their occupation of Muslim shrines. Israel, for example, could by that reasoning turn the al-Aqsa Mosque into a synagogue. Other religious elements claim that turning Hagia Sophia into a mosque unnecessarily challenges Christendom.

Hagia Sophia has great symbolic weight. To the Turkish regime, reclaiming the cathedral as a mosque asserts the nation’s rights over buildings on its territory. The argument is not only about Islamic versus Christian hegemony (symbolic or otherwise). It is also about the Islamic world. To Erdoğan and Çvuşoğlu, Hagia Sophia is evidence of Turkish Muslim hegemony over the Muslim world. Its transformation into a mosque emphatically declares that position. Is the timing of this move with the anniversary of the aborted July 2016 coup accidental?

Dr. Efrat Avio is a senior lecturer in the Dept. of Middle Eastern Studies at Bar-Ilan University and a research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. She is the author of Antisemitism and Anti-Zionism in Turkey: From Ottoman Rule to AKP (Routledge 2017).