



PERSPECTIVES

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Why Did Erdoğan Convert Hagia Sophia Into a Mosque?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan recently converted Hagia Sophia from a museum into a mosque, a decision that apparently involved no consultation and was executed swiftly after a surprise announcement. What were Erdoğan's true motivations in taking this provocative step?

Hagia Sophia ("Holy Wisdom" in Latin) was built in the 4th century as a Byzantine church. It was just [converted](#) into a mosque following a decision by the Turkish court and final confirmation of the Turkish president.

Many saw the decision as [anti-Christian](#), but it was intended first and foremost to please Arab Muslims. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan wishes to establish himself as the most worthy leader to stand at the head of the Sunni Muslim world. He is careful to display his religiosity, and his wife always appears in modest attire with a hijab. He regularly quotes verses from the Koran in his speeches and frequently prays in public.

Erdoğan has always seen himself as the leader of the Muslim *umma* (a collective term for all Muslims everywhere). He seeks to regain the glory of the Ottoman Empire, whose cherished conquests have parallels in present Turkish actions:

- Turkey's occupation of Northern Cyprus
- The recent arrival of Turkish fighters in Libya
- Invasions by the Turkish army of Syrian territory and occupation of Kurdish towns
- Tacit support for ISIS forces

- Absorption into Turkey of thousands of Egyptian activists from the Muslim Brotherhood and granting them refugee status in Turkey
- Taking steps to gain control of large areas in the region, including Sudan
- Seeking to weaken Saudi Arabia's position as custodian of Islam's holiest shrines in Mecca and Medina
- Gross interference in Israel's internal affairs and its conflict with the Palestinians

Erdoğan is trying to present himself as a defender of the Palestinians and the al-Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. This positioning is part and parcel of his desire to expand Turkey's activities and ultimately take over the Arab world.

In recent years, tension among Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain, and the Emirates divided the Middle East into fronts. Turkey became a defender of Qatar along with Iran. This led to a covert war between Ankara and Riyadh that reached new heights in the [Khashoggi affair](#). The Turkish army has bases in Qatar and protects both the Emir and his land. This is a problem for the Saudis, because if Turkey were not present, they would have the option of taking over Qatar. Ankara is thus standing in the way of a Saudi occupation.

Some believe that through such actions, Erdoğan is trying to steal the kingdom's role as defender of the Arabs, the Muslims, and their two holiest sites, which are both in Saudi territory. His popularity among Arabs is certainly high, especially when he is hostile to Israel. It should be noted that the Turkish army is considered the second-strongest in the Middle East after Israel's.

Erdoğan is trying to have his cake and eat it too. He welcomes Muslim Brotherhood agitators who fled or were expelled from Egypt, but does not persecute the LGBT community in Turkey, even to the point that he permits sex change operations. He has attacked ISIS but has also done business with it. He supports the Islamic Movement within Israel, pours money into those who guard the al-Aqsa Mosque, and verbally attacks Israel and the IDF, but at the same time meets with influential Jewish American leaders and maintains full diplomatic relations with Israel. (For its part, Israel imports close to \$1 billion a year in goods from Turkey.)

Turkey aspires to be the head of the Sunni Muslim international community, but cooperates with Shiite Iran, the enemy of the Sunnis.

He opposes the Israeli "occupation" of the West Bank though he himself is occupying parts of Syria and Cyprus and sending troops to Libya.

He attacks the Europeans but aspires to be part of Europe.

He talks about freedom and democracy but imprisons journalists by the hundreds.

He wants to lead the Muslim world but commits war crimes against the Kurds, who are Muslim.

Erdođan's policy is full of contradictions. Some say he is pragmatic; others claim more aptly that he is hypocritical. He tries to please everyone at their own expense.

Turkey does not need another mosque. The main reason for Erdogan's conversion of the Hagia Sofia was his desire to arouse Muslim passions for populist purposes in an Arab-Islamic world longing for a fresh awakening. This was another move in Turkey's competition with Saudi Arabia for hegemony over the Sunni Muslim world.

This is an edited version of an [article](#) that appeared in Israel Today on July 27, 2020.

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