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## WHAT DOES THE CONVERSION OF HAGIA SOPHIA INTO A MOSQUE MEAN?

ZURAB BATIASHVILI

# 147

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი  
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## **EXPERT OPINION**

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INTO A MOSQUE MEAN?**

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The decision of the Turkish government, by which the Hagia Sophia Museum was transformed into a mosque on July 24, 2020, was followed by vast discussions on both inside the country and in the international arena.

The matter of converting Hagia Sophia into a mosque is part of the larger socio-political changes ongoing in Turkey which are a part of a prolonged process. Today, the Turkish government has to fight on many fronts. On the one hand, the country is facing serious economic difficulties (especially against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic). On the other hand, Ankara is very active in foreign policy, bringing about a number of threats and challenges. And most importantly, it also has a long-term agenda that takes a lot of time, energy and finances. The transformation of Hagia Sophia into a mosque is precisely a component of this long-term agenda.

Moreover, this issue contains a great deal of historical, symbolic and political context which is why it will remain in the spotlight for a long time.

## **Brief History**

Built almost 1,500 years ago, the magnificent Hagia Sophia remains one of the world's most important architectural masterpieces and a kind of "eighth wonder."

It functioned as an All-Christian Patriarchal Cathedral until 1054 (before the partition of the Church). After this date, it became mainly an Orthodox Church. During the Latin rule in Constantinople (1204-1261), it functioned as a Catholic church. However, after the return of the city by the Byzantines, it re-acquired the function of an Orthodox church.

The Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II conquered Constantinople and ended the Byzantine Empire on May 29, 1453. He turned Hagia Sophia into a mosque and also performed the first Friday prayer there.<sup>1</sup>

The founder and first President of the Republic of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, transformed Hagia Sophia into a museum in 1935.

Four years prior to that, the work which was started by American specialists revealed precious mosaics that had previously been covered up according to Islamic rules.

It may be argued that from almost the same period, the issue of converting Hagia Sophia once more into a mosque has been on the agenda of the Turkish Conservative forces and it has become an unfulfilled dream of many generations of local Muslims.

Hagia Sophia has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1985.<sup>2</sup>

Along with the strengthening of conservative forces in Turkey, a protracted but irreversible process of the transformation of Hagia Sophia into a mosque has begun.

In 1991, the Turkish government allowed Muslims to pray within the Museum complex of Hagia Sophia (but not directly in Hagia Sophia). And since 2013, the Ezan (a call for pilgrims to pray) has been performed regularly from the museum's minarets.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, the process of converting former churches and existing museums into mosques was began in Turkey: Iznik's Hagia Sophia (historic Nicaea)<sup>4</sup> in 2011, Trabzon's Hagia Sophia<sup>5</sup> in 2013 and the Khora Monastery<sup>6</sup> in 2019 were converted into mosques.

Everything indicated that the Hagia Sophia of Istanbul was next in line. The first hint of this was made by the President of the Republic of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in March 2019,<sup>7</sup> adding that turning it into a museum in the first place was a "very big mistake."<sup>8</sup>

Many expected Hagia Sophia to be converted into a mosque on May 29, 2020 (the 567th anniversary of the conquest of Constantinople). However, this happened a little later, on July 24th.

## **The Symbolic and Political Significance of Hagia Sophia**

Different groups have different attitudes towards Hagia Sophia. They look at the world from a diverse prism, including the issue of Hagia Sophia. The only thing they inadvertently converge on is that Hagia Sophia has a great symbolic significance. For some, it might be the symbol of the victory of the Ottomans over Byzantium (or even of Islam over Christianity)<sup>9</sup> while for others it was a symbol of secular rule in Turkey and the reforms carried out by Atatürk.<sup>10</sup> And yet

others view it as the greatest monument and symbol of Orthodoxy. Also, for many, Hagia Sophia is a unique World Heritage Site.

The Turkish government appealed to the sovereign right when it decided to change the status of Hagia Sophia.<sup>11</sup> However, no one disputed this matter. Simply, altering the status-quo for symbols (especially religious symbols) can be very sensitive. Perhaps this was the motivation of most of the international community (including UNESCO,<sup>12</sup> the Pope, the World Patriarch and the leaders of various states) when they called upon the Turkish authorities to maintain a neutral status (museum) for Hagia Sophia.<sup>13</sup> Despite these calls, Ankara has not changed its decision regarding Hagia Sophia.

Such an approach has its own reasons. It is clear to everyone that Turkey has long established itself as an independent foreign policy actor in the international arena. This was especially noticeable after the Soviet Union disintegrated and Turkey no longer faced an existential threat. As a result, it gradually started to pursue an independent foreign policy which was intensified by the rise to power of the conservative Justice and Development Party (AK Party) in 2002. The Conservatives began to pursue an even more balanced foreign policy, convinced that in the absence of an existential threat, it was no longer necessary to pursue a foreign policy course parallel to the West.

Many expected that the Republican People's Party (CHP), founded by Ataturk and now the country's main opposition force, and other Kemalists would come out against this move by the Turkish government, sparking a major political debate in the country. But that did not happen. The weakened and disorganized opposition chose to acquiesce, they did not oppose, except for a couple of exceptions.

According to one part of the Turkish opposition, the ruling party is trying to divert people's attention from the economic problems exacerbated by the pandemic by converting Hagia Sophia into a mosque.<sup>14</sup> There have also been speculations that the ruling party might be preparing for early parliamentary elections and aims to consolidate conservative voters with this move. However, it should be noted that the issue of postponing the elections is not being considered at this stage. Consequently, we can conclude that Erdogan

acted with a view to resolve an issue on his long-term agenda and not to score occasional points.

It is noteworthy that the date of the transformation of the Hagia Sophia Museum into a mosque itself had a symbolic significance. July 24 marks exactly 97 years since the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne between the Republic of Turkey and the Western countries (including Greece)<sup>15</sup> which largely established the borders of the modern Turkish republic.<sup>16</sup> The Turkish Conservatives believe that the Lausanne Peace Treaty was as unfair as the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a museum as Turkey lost important territories because of this treaty (including the Arab states and the Aegean islands - now belonging to Greece).<sup>17</sup>

Because of this, many people felt that the Turkish government might be trying to revise the Lausanne Treaty.<sup>18</sup> This is perhaps even more so when so-called “Blue Homeland Doctrine” has been operational in the country since the end of 2019. The doctrine implies the expansion of Turkey’s economic zones in the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas and it “swallows” the Greek islands.



*The so-called Turkish “Blue Homeland Doctrine”*

The ceremony of converting Hagia Sophia into a mosque was itself loaded with symbols. The Head of the Religious Affairs Department of the Republic of Turkey, Ali Erbaş, climbed the Hagia Sophia minbar with a sword in his hand (the Ottoman Empire had a “right to that which is acquired by a sword”). Two green flags were displayed on the minbar as a symbol of the capture of the city (Constantinople).

Interestingly, in his speech at the ceremony, Ali Erbaş sent a curse to those who changed the mosque status of Hagia Sophia, which was perceived by many as an insult to Atatürk, and this fact was strongly criticized by the public.<sup>19</sup> In light of such a negative attitude, Erbaş later said that his words were misinterpreted.<sup>20</sup>

In response to the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque by Turkey, the Greek Church lowered state flags as a sign of mourning and alarm bells were sounded in churches.

In fact, centuries later on July 24, in the struggle with these symbols, both sides revived the May 29, 1453 capture of Constantinople by the Ottomans, something which is no less of a sensitive topic.

Despite such a situation, Hagia Sophia remains open to foreign tourists.<sup>21</sup> The difference, however, is that the frescoes are covered with special curtains according to the rules of Islam during Muslim prayer.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, visiting Hagia Sophia became free of charge. Despite the high price of the ticket (TRY 100 which is about USD 14.6), Hagia Sophia remained the most popular place for foreign tourists in Turkey in 2019. It was visited by 3.7 million people last year.<sup>23</sup> From tickets to the Hagia Sophia Museum alone, the Turkish budget lost about USD 54 million. Its political significance, however, is so great that the material income side of the issue has not even been seriously discussed in the Turkish media.

That Hagia Sophia is not a separate, isolated topic is well illustrated by the statements and actions we see before and after its conversion into a mosque. For example, President Erdoğan announced on July 16 that the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem would be “liberated” after Hagia Sophia<sup>24</sup> which naturally led to the dissatisfaction of Israel and world’s Jewish organizations.<sup>25</sup>

Interesting rhetoric was heard in an interview with CNN Türk by President’s son Bilal Erdoğan on July 26 in which he questioned the



link between changing the alphabet and clothing (Ataturk's reforms) and the country's development.<sup>26</sup>

The pro-government magazine, *Gerçek Hayat*, went even further, declaring that the time had come to restore the caliphate<sup>27</sup> (the abolition of the caliphate was one of the major reforms carried out by Ataturk and even the discussion of this issue was banned under Article 4 of the Turkish Constitution<sup>28</sup>). It is noteworthy that after a sharply negative attitude expressed by the public towards the issue, the authorities said that the matter was not on the agenda.<sup>29</sup>

However, similar rhetoric later resumed. For example, the pro-government newspaper, *Yeni Akit*, published a letter on August 7, stating that dance has nothing to do with the Turkish and Islamic culture and called for the abolition of dance lessons at universities as a means of Western influence.<sup>30</sup>

On the basis that it contradicted "Turkish traditions," conservative forces also demanded Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention for the Prevention of Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, signed in 2011, in July. However, this initiative was also met with a sharply negative reaction from Turkish society (including parts of the ruling party) and was removed from the agenda at this stage.<sup>31</sup>

Interestingly, the battle with the symbols continued in the foreign policy arena as well. On August 8, Ankara announced that Turkey did not agree with the Greek-Egyptian agreement on the division of the economic zones of the Eastern Mediterranean. It considers these places as part of its domain. On August 10, Turkey sent warships there for military training.<sup>32</sup>

Interestingly, the starting date of these exercises is also symbolic. August 10 (1920) marks the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Sevres which was humiliating for Turkey.<sup>33</sup>

In response, the Greek armed forces were put on high alert.<sup>34</sup> It is quite possible for this place to become yet another source of tension in the region.



*Eastern Mediterranean region where Turkey began military training*

## Georgia and Hagia Sophia

Official Tbilisi has not taken a position on Hagia Sophia's conversion into a mosque. But for a while, however, this topic was in the spotlight of Georgian media. It has also become a hot topic of discussion on social media.

The Patriarchate expressed its opinion on the matter in a statement issued on July 9 which, it should be noted, was quite measured. In particular, the Patriarchate expressed hope that Hagia Sophia would retain its neutral (museum) status, adding: "We respect the sovereignty of the Republic of Turkey, we hope that this attitude will be perceived by the friendly state not as interference in its internal affairs, but as an expression of opinion and heartache of one of the oldest Orthodox Churches. We hope that the good-neighborly, friendly and strategic relations between Turkey and Georgia will continue to deepen, bringing prosperity to both countries."<sup>35</sup> But clearly, this statement could not influence the decision on the status of Hagia Sophia.

## Conclusions

- Since, the issue of religious symbols is a very sensitive, the matter of turning Hagia Sophia into a mosque will remain a topic of discussion for a long time, both in Turkey and abroad.
- When making his decision on Hagia Sophia, Erdogan was guided not by a desire to score occasional points but by fulfilling one of the long-term goals of Turkey's conservative and Islamist forces.
- Converting Hagia Sophia into a mosque is not an isolated issue. It is part of a larger process that can be called the return of Turkey to its «own roots» or «its own heritage.»
- Presumably, this process will not stop and it will continue both domestically and in the international arena. The selection of the anniversary of the Treaty of Lausanne as the date of the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque is additional evidence of this.
- With its recent actions, Turkey is sending another serious message to the Muslim world indicating that precisely Turkey is the one which should claim to be the leader of the Sunni world. However, in this regard it comes into serious confrontation with Saudi Arabia and the coalition of Sunni-Arab countries gathered around it.
- It is clear that the new changes in Turkey will not be quick. Its implementation will take some time and finances. Much in this regard will depend on the state of the Turkish economy which has been recently facing serious difficulties.
- The transformation of Hagia Sophia into a mosque is a clear message to the international community that Turkey is an independent foreign policy actor and it may take little or, if necessary, no account of the opinion of the international community.
- However, this move does not serve the purpose of changing Turkey's image for the better in the West.
- This is a message to Moscow that if it continues to prepare undesirable “surprises” for Ankara in the Middle East (Syria, Libya, etc.), then Turkey can also take some retaliatory steps which may be of some inconvenience for Moscow.

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