

## Hagia Sophia: Turkey's secularism under threat

Turkey's decision to convert Hagia Sophia in Istanbul into a mosque, announced on 10 July 2020, created a wave of protest from international and EU authorities, who fear for religious freedom and the republican secular tradition in Turkey. The Foreign Affairs Council of the European Union (EU) condemned this decision at its meeting of 13 July 2020, alongside international organisations including the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco), raising concerns that the decision would 'fuel mistrust, promote renewed divisions between religious communities and undermine efforts at dialogue and cooperation'. While Turkey is still an EU candidate country, several recent initiatives, ranging from military interventions in Syria and military assistance to Libya in breach of the arms embargo, to illegal gas drilling and repeated threats to EU Member States in the eastern Mediterranean, undermine the country's path towards EU membership and open the door to possible sanctions.

### Hagia Sophia and Turkish constitutional tradition

In 1934, Turkish leader Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's government decreed that Hagia Sofia, an architecturally and symbolically significant Byzantine basilica converted into a mosque following the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453, become a museum. The decision to open this ancient religious building as a museum was widely regarded as a symbol of peaceful co-existence and of the secular character of the Turkish Republic. The recent Turkish Council of State ruling invalidates this 1934 decree and grants Turkey's president the authority to restore the museum to its status as a functioning mosque, noting that the title deeds to the site classify the building as a mosque. Immediately following the Council of State decision, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan [announced](#) the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque, with Friday prayers organised for around 1 000-1 500 worshippers on 24 July 2020. He also placed the building under Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyane*) administration. President Erdoğan [rejected](#) international criticism on 17 July, declaring the decision a matter of Turkish sovereignty.

### Legal and political aspects of the 10 July decision

The Turkish constitution, approved in 1982 under military rule, carried over the basic tenets of a secular republic [introduced](#) by the 1928 amendment of Atatürk's original 1924 constitution, which removed the provision declaring that the 'religion of the State is Islam'. Constitutional reform in 2016 was strongly criticised by the EU and international community, as it reinforced autocratic presidential rule and diminished human rights and freedoms. However, the reform left the secular tradition untouched, despite some, such as Ismail Kahraman, speaker of the parliament, [calling](#) for an Islamic constitution. A law authorising *mufti* (professional jurists interpreting Muslim law) to perform civil marriages and amending civil registration rules was adopted in 2017, and experts [noted](#) that 'there is an increased demand for application of Islamic law in everyday life due to the spread of Islamic education'.

The political background to the decision on the Hagia Sophia has a double aspect, one emerging immediately following the defeat of Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) candidate for the Istanbul mayoralty to Ekrem Imamoglu of the Republican People's Party in June 2019. Himself a former mayor of Istanbul, observers note that Erdogan [needs](#) to boost his popularity in the city. Furthermore, the [Brookings Institution](#) recalls that the 'combination of a weak economy and an unending spiral of authoritarianism will make a robust recovery from the [Covid-19] pandemic even more difficult. Instead, the path to normalisation is likely to be marked by growing political instability and debates over the likelihood of early elections.'

The second aspect concerns the religious background of the governing Justice and Development Party and President Erdoğan, a devout Sunni Muslim. Erdoğan's own political rise, from mayor of Istanbul in the 1990s to the national stage, began following his arrest for a public reading of an Islamic poem considered as anti-secular. His intellectual mentor, Islamist poet and writer Necip Fazıl Kısakürek (1904-1983), also inspired a

large part of the AKP political elites in Turkey. Svante Cornell [wrote](#) that 'like many contemporary Islamists, [Kısakürek] incorporated ... a totalitarian Islamist and nationalist regime built on Sunni Islam and Turkish ethnicity'. Sean R. Singer [called](#) Kısakürek 'Erdoğan's muse', as Erdoğan himself cited Kısakürek as the single person who influenced him most, referred to him as his 'master', and often recited his poetry.

From the point of view of Turkey's international engagements, under Article 6 of the [Unesco Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage](#), to which Turkey is a signatory, the conversion of heritage sites is not permitted without prior consent, as 'such heritage constitutes a world heritage for whose protection it is the duty of the international community as a whole to co-operate'. Such conversion requires Unesco Conservation Council authorisation, after the Intergovernmental World Heritage Committee issues an opinion. To this end, a formal request must be submitted, which Turkey has not done.

### International reactions

The international community has largely condemned the 10 July 2020 decision. The same day, EU High Representative/Vice-President (HR/VP) Josep Borrell Fontelles [called](#) the decision 'regrettable', as 'Turkey has committed to the promotion of inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue and to fostering of tolerance and co-existence'. Already in its 2015 [report on Turkey](#), the European Commission had stressed that past references to the possible transformation of Hagia Sophia into a mosque were controversial. The 13 July meeting of EU foreign ministers [condemned](#) the decision and called on the Turkish authorities 'to urgently reconsider and reverse their decision'. Following this meeting, HR/VP Borrell [said](#) that Turkey's unilateral actions 'must come to an end', referring inter alia to previous EU action to place two Turkish citizens under [restrictive measures](#) in February 2020, in relation to Turkey's unauthorised drilling activities in the eastern Mediterranean.

On 1 July 2020, in advance of Turkey's decision, United States Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [stated](#) that converting the Hagia Sophia would limit 'its unsurpassed ability – so rare in the modern world – to serve humanity as a much-needed bridge between those of differing faith traditions and cultures'.

Unesco Director-General Audrey Azoulay [condemned](#) the decision on 10 July, saying that 'Hagia Sophia is an architectural masterpiece and a unique testimony to interactions between Europe and Asia over the centuries. Its status as a museum reflects the universal nature of its heritage, and makes it a powerful symbol for dialogue'.

Religious leaders also issued statements, including [Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew](#), spiritual leader of Orthodox Christians: 'As [a] museum, Hagia Sophia can function as place and symbol of encounter, dialogue and peaceful coexistence of peoples and cultures, mutual understanding and solidarity between Christianity and Islam'. [Pope Francis](#) said 'I think of Hagia Sophia, and I am very saddened'. According to [Reuters](#), the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, stated, 'A threat against Hagia Sophia is a threat to all of Christian civilisation.'

### European Parliament position

Several European Parliament reports have condemned Turkish military operations in Syria; Turkish assistance to Libya; and other geostrategic issues, such as gas drilling in Cyprus territorial waters and maritime disputes over areas in the eastern Mediterranean with Cyprus and Greece; as well as the drop in democratic standards since the failed military coup in 2016. In its October 2019 [resolution](#) on Turkish military action in Syria, Parliament called on the Council to consider suspending trade preferences. The February 2019 Committee on Foreign Affairs [report](#) on the European Commission's 2018 report on Turkey expressed serious concerns 'about the lack of respect for freedom of religion, discrimination against religious minorities, including Christians and Alevis, and violence perpetrated on religious grounds'. The earlier July 2017 [report](#) on the Commission's 2016 report on Turkey called for formal suspension of accession negotiations with Turkey 'without delay', based on falling democratic standards and human rights. This report also recalled that the Turkish government has a responsibility to protect all of its citizens, 'irrespective of their cultural or religious origins and beliefs'; and deplored 'the widespread practice of expropriation, including of properties belonging to the municipalities and also of church properties, which is a violation of the rights of religious minorities'.

