



## Turkish court delays decision on turning Hagia Sophia into mosque

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The Council of State, Turkey's highest administrative court, has delayed a decision on whether to accept President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's request to turn the Hagia Sophia museum into a mosque, the [BBC](#) said.

The court in Ankara said it would make a ruling within 15 days after a hearing on Thursday that lasted just 17 minutes.

The Hagia Sophia, originally built as a Byzantine cathedral in 537, was turned into a mosque following the Ottoman conquest of Istanbul on May 29, 1453, and then became a museum in 1935 under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's presidency. Yet it is now, again, one of the most contested religious buildings in the world.

Writing in the [Sözcü newspaper](#) on Wednesday, columnist Saygı Öztürk had predicted that the court would likely defer the decision and said that it will probably rule that changing the status of the building is a political decision, not a legal one. Erdoğan's government is then expected to decide to abolish Hagia Sophia's status as a museum, Öztürk said.

The [Orthodox Times](#) website reported in June that a member of the State Council had asked for the case to be dismissed, arguing that the status of Hagia Sophia as a museum remains within the discretion of the state, rather than of the court.

But in November 2019 the court considered a similar case regarding the Chora museum in Istanbul; which was also a church that had been converted into a mosque under the Ottomans, before being turned into a museum in 1948.

The court ruled that the Chora's conversion into a museum had been unlawful because a mosque "cannot be used except for its essential function".

Meanwhile, analysts, as well as major political and religious figures, have urged the Turkish leader to drop his controversial plans, which they say could deal a major blow for religious heritage and Turkey's relations with much of the world.

Richard V. Reeves, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, and Mustafa Akyol, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, wrote in [Foreign Policy magazine](#) on Wednesday that converting the

Hagia Sophia into a mosque would destroy its dual Orthodox Christian-Islamic heritage and would be a blow to religious pluralism and tolerance.

Erdoğan has repeatedly suggested turning the UNESCO World Heritage Site back into a mosque to fulfil a long-standing demand by Turkey's religious conservatives - his political base - much to Greece's consternation.

“For Erdoğan it would be a huge symbolic step toward bolstering his religious nationalism,” Reeves and Akyol said. “But for many others, including Turkey's tiny Christian minority and millions of other Christians around the world, it will be a disturbing echo of the bloody conquests of the Middle Ages - not the peaceful coexistence most people aspire to in the modern world.”

Reeves and Akyol quoted the historian Diarmaid MacCulloch as observing that: “Orthodoxy has to a remarkable extent been moulded round one single church building...the Cathedral of the Holy Wisdom (Hagia Sophia).”

Atatürk, Turkey's first president, secularised the building and reopened it as a museum in 1935 partly to curry favour internationally, including to help foster better relations with neighbouring Greece, Reeves and Akyol said.

But Turkey's religious conservatives may have long dreamed about reopening Hagia Sophia as a mosque partly in reaction to Atatürk's strident secularism, which included some repression of Islamic practices and dress. This may also be one motivating factor for Erdoğan, a pious Muslim whose political background is rooted in Islamism, in his push to change its status.

“It seems that Erdoğan is finally ready to take this historic step, to show that he really is making Turkey Muslim again,” Reeves and Akyol said.

Yet, there may also be more immediate political motivations at play, as Erdoğan seeks to boost his domestic popularity. Erdoğan is facing challenges from two new parties that broke away from his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), which could appeal to his conservative base: the Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA), led by former Economy Minister Ali Babacan, and the Future Party, led by former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu.

Some critics also accuse Erdoğan's government of using the planned conversion to boost its support during a time of economic hardships exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and during a broader political and social malaise.

“The popularity of Erdoğan's ruling party is at a two-year low - because of a declining economy, as well as appalling levels of authoritarianism and corruption,” Reeves and Akyol wrote.

Erdoğan certainly seems to be in a hurry to change the site's status. A Muslim prayer was held at the site on May 29 to mark the anniversary of the Ottoman conquest of Istanbul. His Presidential High Advisory Board discussed the issue on June 16. Some advisors are hoping that Islamic prayers could be held in the mosque on July 15, the anniversary of the failed coup against Erdoğan's government in 2016.

For some, frequent arguments over symbolic subjects such as the future use of the Hagia Sophia are tiresome and chauvinistic expressions of rival nationalisms - both Turkish and Greek.

Nicholas Danforth, senior visiting Fellow at the German Marshall Fund, wrote in Apollo Magazine in 2019 that the Hagia Sophia in particular continues to serve as a vehicle for competing civilisational chauvinisms. Erdoğan may well now be revelling in the chorus of disapproval, amplified by incessant media coverage.

The head of the Eastern Orthodox Church, known as the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, is still based in Istanbul. On Tuesday, Patriarch Bartholomew said that the conversion of the building would "disappoint millions of Christians" and fracture two worlds.

Last week, U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback called on Turkey to leave the building as a museum.

On Wednesday, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned that any change in the Hagia Sophia's status would diminish its ability to "serve humanity as a much-needed bridge between those of differing faith traditions and cultures".

Pompeo said the museum had served as "an exemplar of [Turkey's] commitment to respect the faith traditions and diverse history that contributed to the Republic of Turkey, and to ensure it remains accessible to all".

In a swift response on Wednesday, Turkey's Foreign Ministry spokesman Hami Aksoy slammed Pompeo for his comments.

"We are shocked at the statement made by the U.S. State Department on Hagia Sophia," Aksoy was quoted as saying by the state-run Anadolu news agency.

"Hagia Sophia, situated on our land is the property of Turkey, like all our cultural assets," he said.

Aksoy said that the status of the Hagia Sophia is "our internal affair as part of Turkey's sovereign rights".

"Naturally everyone is free to express their own opinion. However, it is not for anyone to talk about our sovereign rights in the style of 'we urge, we demand'," he added.

Both the Chora and the Hagia Sophia are on UNESCO's world heritage list as "architectural masterpieces." The Hagia Sophia needs urgent repairs, which are more likely to be financed if it becomes a mosque again, Reeves and Akyol said.

"But it's unclear whether such repairs would protect the building's Christian imagery, which Muslims may see as unacceptable if the building turns into a mosque," they wrote. Like the Chora, the Hagia Sophia building is filled with priceless Christian mosaics and frescoes.

Reeves and Akyol suggested there is a better way than converting it into a mosque, or preserving the status quo - as it could be opened for both Muslim and Christian worship, since it is big enough to consecrate separate areas.

"Hagia Sophia belongs not only to those who own the monument, but also to all of humanity," Bartholomew said on Tuesday. "And the Turkish people have a responsibility to highlight this universality of the monument."