



## POINT OF VIEW

# Re-converting Hagia Sophia; Erdoğan and his Arab and Muslim audience

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The decision of the Turkish Constitutional Court to revoke the almost 85-year-old museum status of Hagia Sophia and allow its conversion to a mosque did not come as a bolt out of the blue. Instead, it is the by-product of a decades – old battle concerning the republic's oppressed Islamic soul and the orientations of her foreign policy vis-à-vis the Arab and the Muslim world.

Turkish parliament speaker and AKP cadre, Mustafa Şentop's statement that "it was a dream and a goal for my generation"<sup>1</sup> speaks volumes about the centrality of that highly contested issue in the political programs of the country's Islamists since the 1960s and 1970s. Necmettin Erbakan's Refah Partisi was ousted from power by military force in 1997 on the grounds of nurturing Islamist tendencies; the prospect of Hagia Sophia's re-conversion has been mentioned among other projects that threatened the secular character of the republic.<sup>2</sup> In 2013 then Prime Minister Erdoğan once again implied the possibility of turning the world heritage monument to a mosque, while in 2017, on the anniversary of Istanbul's fath, i.e. conquest, zealots belonging to the Anatolian Youth Organization or AGD called for "the liberation of Ayasofya from its chains".<sup>3</sup>

Aside from domestic factors, such as the need to reclaim AKP's conservative electoral base in the wake of two consecutive defeats in Istanbul's mayoral elections and the emergence of two rival, center – right Islamist parties, together with public distraction from the handling of the Coronavirus epidemic and the deteriorating state of the economy,<sup>4</sup> Erdoğan's move stems from his party's consistent policy of rebranding Turkey as a Muslim superpower.

In this regard, Erdoğan equated the re-opening of Ayasofya as a mosque to Ankara's "legitimate right of intervening in Syria and Libya"; in another instance the Turkish President rejected Western outcry as hypocritical: "those who did not do anything to prevent the rising tide of islamophobia in their societies cannot dictate our sovereign nation what to do with Ayasofya".<sup>5</sup> Apart from his conservative and nationalist compatriots who support him, Erdoğan speaks on behalf of a re-imagined Ummah via the Arabic and English editions of the AKP's official website; the almost 3.600.000 – predominantly Arab Sunni –

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registered Syrian refugees in Turkey, in addition to Muslims around the globe residing in Muslim and non – Muslim surroundings alike.

As a matter of fact, Arab and Muslim responses to the conversion of Hagia Sophia cannot be viewed irrespectively of Ankara's geopolitical empowerment and the impact of her policies in the Middle East, North Africa and beyond. According to a poll of 25.000 Arab youths carried out for BBC Arabic between 2018 – 2019 in 11 countries, Erdoğan's popularity exceeded 75 percent of the vote in Sudan, Jordan and the Palestinian Territories, whereas it dropped to 50 and less than 50 percent in Tunisia and Iraq respectively and 25 percent in Lebanon, Libya and Egypt,<sup>6</sup> i.e. countries of non – Sunni majorities, as well as Sunni countries bitterly divided over their foreign policy orientation towards Turkey.

Even though such poll has not been conducted yet to assess the Arab and Muslim reception of the Hagia Sophia issue, we do not have any serious indications to doubt the persistence of those well – established trends. This is particularly true for the Palestinians; since the Mavi Marmara incident in 2010 Ankara has invested politically in rebranding herself as a major backer of Palestine, being cautious however not to officially disrupt her relations with Israel. With annexation looming and amidst economic strangulation in West Bank and Gaza, both the rival factions of Fatah and Hamas seek Erdoğan's friendship and tutelage; what is more, Hamas went one step further, by congratulating Turkey on her "historic decision to convert Hagia Sophia". In the meantime, in a speech of unprecedented symbolism, Erdoğan referred to the resurrection of Hagia Sophia "as heralding the liberation of al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem".<sup>7</sup>

On top of that, the Turkish President linked the conversion issue to his popular "oppressed people" rhetoric which has deeply influenced AKP discourses in the aftermath of the Arab Spring uprisings. Almost ten years after the Yasmine Revolution in Tunisia and Cairo's Tahrir Square events, the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf have been abruptly reshaped along the lines of a new geopolitical and ideological divide. The pro-Turkish camp including the Al-Thani dynasty of Qatar and their Islamist affiliated allies, such as the GNA in Tripoli, invokes Arab – Muslim support for the conversion of Hagia Sophia as a means to reconfirm its coherence against the Emirati-Saudi-Egyptian axis in their fierce contest for regional hegemony.

The two blocks politicize the conversion issue, while relations between them are at their lowest ebb; Turkey provoked Saudi Arabia by putting 20 of her nationals on trial over Jamal Khashoggi's murder and at the same time confronts militarily Khalifa Haftar, a proxy of the UAE and Egypt in the ongoing Libyan civil war. Against this background, the outlawed in Egypt and the Gulf, Muslim Brotherhood praised the Turkish people "for protecting Islam for 600 years" and even talked about "revenge on Kemalism for the abolition of the Caliphate in 1924".<sup>8</sup> Al – Azhar doctors and jurists, on the contrary, condemned the conversion arguing that "it is incompatible to Islam and the Sharia". According to an Egyptian professor, "the true face of Political Islam and Ikhwani rule has been revealed".<sup>9</sup> In a nutshell, the Hagia Sophia affair exacerbated existing intra – Sunni cleavages.

As for the non – Arab Muslim countries, Turkish media boasts about the satisfaction of populous nations, like the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan and Indonesia with Turkey's decision. Meanwhile, the fact that even the major Orthodox power, Russia, finally backed down on her initial reservations about the conversion and now refers to it as an "internal Turkish affair" remains a valuable credit to Erdoğan.<sup>10</sup>

Summing up, due to the relative indifference of the international community and the weak responses of the Christian nations or even their inability to reverse the fate of Hagia Sophia's status, it seems that, for the time being, Turkey gains domestically and regionally at the lowest diplomatic cost. Rather than ending up isolated, the global reception of the country's "achievement" is indicative of her ambition to lead the Muslim world without jeopardizing her vital geopolitical relations with Russia, the U.S. and the E.U. Besides, there are far more important issues at stake, such as immigration/refugees, NATO, Syria and Libya, therefore all channels of communication with Ankara must remain open. Ahead of the 2023 general elections, it remains to be seen whether Erdoğan and his party are still able to capitalize internally on the enthusiasm of their Arab and Muslim audiences abroad.

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