

Converting Hagia Sophia for Domestic Consumption Will Backfire on Erdogan

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On Friday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan signed a decree changing the status of the Byzantine-era built Hagia Sophia from a museum to a mosque. The first Islamic service in the formerly Christian Orthodox Cathedral is scheduled for July 24 and a flurry of international condemnation has been heard. Greece of course has been the dominant voice in condemning the conversion, but UNESCO “deeply regrets” Turkey’s decision, France said Hagia Sophia should continue to represent “the diversity of religious heritage, dialogue and tolerance,” the World Council of Churches expressed “grief and dismay,” and Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev, the chairman of the Russian Orthodox Church’s Department of External Church Relations, said “it is a blow to global Christianity ... For us [Hagia Sophia] remains a cathedral dedicated to the Saviour.”

Both Washington and Moscow however seem not too concerned. The U.S. State Department said that although it was “disappointed” with the decision, they understood that “the Turkish Government remains committed to maintaining access to the Hagia Sophia for all visitors, and look forward to hearing its plans for continued stewardship of the Hagia Sophia.” In Moscow, the chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the upper house of the Russian parliament, Konstantin Kosachev, said “this will trigger an extremely negative response throughout the entire Christian world,” but Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov dismissed the issue as an “internal affair” of Turkey’s.

The question begs however, why after 18 years of ruling Turkey has Erdoğan only now decided to convert Hagia Sophia into a mosque.

Istanbul journalist and TELE 1 editor-in-chief Merdan Yanardağ said that Hagia Sophia’s change of status was a political manoeuvre.

“I do not think Turkey needs a new mosque. There are plenty of mosques in Istanbul and the existing mosques are not full even during Friday prayers,” said Yanardağ. “I believe that the desire to turn the Hagia Sophia into a mosque again is an effort to achieve narrow Islamist goals. The goal is to use people’s religious feelings.”

This certainly appears to be true, especially as many moderate [Muslim associations](#) and [theologians](#) have condemned the conversion of Hagia Sophia, while radical Islamic Republics [like Iran](#) and [Pakistan](#), and terrorist organizations like [Hamas](#) and [Jaish-e-Mohammed](#), celebrated it. There is a clear divide between moderate Muslims and radical Muslims, with moderate Muslims quoting Quranic verses that forbid the conversion of Christian sites into Islamic ones, while radical Muslims see the conversion as a right of conquest.

However, despite all the religious undertones and official reasoning, the conversion of Hagia Sophia is for purely political reasons. Turkey has a struggling economy, coronavirus is still out of control despite the official narrative, there are costly wars in Syria, Iraq and Libya, and there has been a significant decline in human rights. With all of this combined, Erdoğan's popularity is rapidly declining. According to [Metropoll](#), Erdoğan's approval rating in March was 55.8%. It is not known what it currently is, but it surely would have significantly risen with the conversion of Hagia Sophia.

To improve his declining popularity, Erdoğan has used one of his major trump cards. Erdoğan has been in power for 18 years and always threatened to convert the Hagia Sophia. This however is not a move that he did lightly, and it was precisely only to be done in times of crisis for domestic consumption, appeasing both nationalists and Islamists.

Although Erdoğan might get an immediate spike of approval in Turkey with this move, it will not last long as the repercussions of the conversion will be strongly felt as the EU, through strong campaigning by France, Greece and Cyprus at yesterday's EU Foreign Ministers meeting, may apply sanctions against Turkey if they do not reverse their conversion by August. The EU sanctions are likely to hit Turkey's economy by specifically targeting its tourism and banking sectors, something that will greatly affect the Turkish lira and starve Turkey of desperately needed foreign currencies. Sanctions have not officially been placed yet, but [tour companies](#) are already cancelling their excursions to Turkey, depriving Turkey of precious foreign currencies at a time when Ankara is pleading to Germany and the EU to allow European travellers to go to Turkey this summer.

There is little doubt that the conversion of Hagia Sophia was for political reasons and domestic consumption to boost Erdoğan's approval at a time when it is declining. But it will likely prove to be a short-term solution when the full affects of sanctions against Turkey's economy is felt. The Turkish lira hit a record low on May 7, and it is likely when sanctions are placed the Turkish lira will hit a new record low that will see Erdoğan's approval rating plunge, despite converting Hagia Sophia. The Hagia Sophia conversion was a short-term gain for Erdoğan that will have longstanding economic repercussions for Turkey and will work against him not only internationally, but also domestically.

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