

Erdogan turns Hagia Sophia into a mosque: Islamists rejoice, Trump is silent and Turkey's opposition won't be distracted

'Hagia Sofia first, then Al-Aqsa': Erdogan's decree is a personal ideological triumph that won him global Islamist plaudits and muted international backlash. But it could also energize Turkey's anti-Erdogan opposition

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In one of his boldest moves ever, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan issued a decree Friday changing the status of Hagia Sophia from a museum back to a mosque. The cathedral of Hagia Sophia, commissioned by the Roman emperor Justinian I and completed in 537, was originally the crown jewel of the Byzantine Empire's capital of Constantinople.

In 1453, as Ottoman sultan Mehmet the Conqueror entered Constantinople, he converted the architectural wonder, which had borne the title of the largest cathedral in the world for a thousand years, into a mosque. Even though it would later be joined by the beauties of the Suleymaniye and the Sultan Ahmet (Blue) Mosques vying for attention on the city's skyline, Hagia Sophia would never lose its original glory.

It was Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, iconic leader of the Turkish national movement, who stamped his authority on the building no less than his predecessors. In 1934, by the will of Ataturk, and a cabinet decree, the Christian-then-Muslim house of prayer was transformed into a museum, opening to the public a year later. Hagia Sophia was now declared a relic of the past, a gem to be polished and showcased to the world as the heritage of a land that encompassed both Christians and Muslims.

However Ataturk's legacy, including his secularizing reforms so admired by the West, remained controversial within his own country. From Erdogan's first day as Istanbul's mayor in 1995, he embraced a completely different vision from the state's founder. For him, Hagia Sophia had never stopped being a mosque, and turning it back into one was always his dream. He believed this reversal would correct Ataturk's act of historical injustice.

Erdogan knew the value of patience, though. Hagia Sophia was nowhere on his immediate to-do list on becoming prime minister in 2003: such a move so

early on would certainly have rang alarm bells domestically, not least among the military who would regard it as a move to undermine the constitutionally enshrined secularism of the state.

And he was engaged in what would be ten years of determined efforts for Turkey to join the European Union, and any move on Hagia Sophia would have been deemed unacceptable and jeopardized his efforts.

So why has Erdogan acted now? To which audiences is he playing? And will it work?

First, Erdogan's Hagia Sophia decree is a power move, both symbolically and geopolitically. It is in many senses the apex of his 18 consecutive years in power, enabled by his newly recharged international standing, and aimed to reinvigorate his standing domestically.

Turkey's international interventions have proliferated and for once, they have found some degree of success. Erdogan has managed to embed his hold over part of northern Syria (with help from Donald Trump, who withdrew a significant number of U.S. troops, at Erdogan's request), and Turkey has managed a strong showing in the Libyan conflict. Erdogan has once again emerged as the unrivaled leader of the world's political Islamists, a status that was extremely fragile after the Arab Spring and during the civil war in Syria.

Among Islamist groups, the restoration of Hagia Sophia to a Muslim house of prayer is nothing less than proof that Islam is winning its ancient battle with the West, and that includes against the "new" Crusaders - Israel. Erdogan made sure to appeal to this crowd (and to revanchists everywhere) in his victory speech, that "the resurrection of Hagia Sophia is the reignition of the fire of hope of Muslims and all the oppressed, wronged, downtrodden and exploited," which will include the "liberation of the Al-Aqsa mosque."

That signaling was made explicit by the wildly divergent official texts that Erdogan's office put out in English (determinedly pluralistic: "Hagia Sophia's doors will be...wide open to all, foreign or local, Muslim or non-Muslim") and Arabic (more aspirationally militant: the "Revival of Hagia Sophia is a sign of the return of freedom to the Al-Aqsa mosque.")

Hardcore Islamists accept Erdogan maintaining relations with Israel as a necessary evil, a prelude to him marching into Jerusalem one day and liberating the Al-Aqsa mosque in person. More moderate followers' more realistic scenario would have Erdogan as the key facilitator and mentor of a

Palestinian state alongside Israel, with Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa mosque under Palestinian sovereignty.

Erdogan also calculated that despite the initial wave of uproar, Turkey wouldn't face significant international repercussions. In Europe, Greece had led the outrage, reflecting the Orthodox world's understandable trauma over Hagia Sophia's new status as a mosque: the Greek president fired off an incensed tweet, calling it a "profoundly provocative act" that "brutally insults historical memory, undermines the value of tolerance, and poisons Turkey's relations with the entire civilized world."

But the EU's inability to tame Turkey is already clear. Turkey holds Europe hostage on the refugee issue, able to threaten the EU at moment's notice with a deluge of millions of refugees, and EU economies are tightly bound to Turkey's as well. It is not surprising that the EU's official statement concerning the Hagia Sophia was simply that it was "regrettable." Such a minimal response strengthens Erdogan's hand.

Erdogan has many more reasons to feel confident that the Hagia Sophia decision will bring him kudos and not punishment. He has found an open check with Trump, who has consistently shown extreme unwillingness to cross him, to the point of serial capitulation.

When Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called on Turkey not to alter Hagia Sophia's status several days ago, the Turkish foreign ministry slapped him down, calling it a matter of Turkey's internal affairs. Since Friday, the U.S. State Department made do with a brief statement that it was "disappointed" with the decision.

Despite being at odds with Russia in both Syria and Libya, Vladimir Putin, too, has decided not to regard the Hagia Sofia move as a provocation requiring the escalation of tensions, despite having maximized the nationalist role of the Orthodox Christian church in Russia.

Whereas Russian Patriarch Kirill called Erdogan's act a "threat to the whole of Christian civilization," the Kremlin was far more subdued, with a foreign affairs official making the amorphous comment that "Turning it into a mosque will not do anything for the Muslim world. It does not bring nations together, but on the contrary brings them into collision." The UK, fresh out of the EU, is mulling a new bilateral trade deal with Turkey and doesn't need what could be seen by voters as an esoteric cause disturbing the process.

Erdogan correctly read that there will not be any real price to pay internationally for his move. And domestically, he thought he would only be reaping the benefits; indeed, the real motivating factor was at home, where he needs to energize his own Islamist and nationalist base.

Over the past year, Erdogan has seen his longstanding popularity waning, as Turkey's economy seems stuck in crisis, now exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, if he had hoped the move might spark another round of Turkey's secularist-Islamist culture wars that he could fuel for his own advantage, how the opposition reacted may prove a rude awakening.

Just a little over a year ago Erdogan, and his accelerating authoritarianism, faced his greatest defeat. Opposition candidate Ekrem Imamoglu won Istanbul's mayoral election with a huge margin, after an earlier voting round was cancelled under pressure when Erdogan's party's candidate lost. Since then, Imamoglu has continued to gain popularity, and could pose as a future challenger in the presidential elections in 2023. There is already speculation that Erdogan may move up the elections to shore up support for his AKP before its political fortunes, and the economy, tank any further.

Imamoglu has also played the Ottoman card, lest Erdogan think he has a monopoly on exploiting Turkey's past glories. The mayor had the Istanbul municipality purchase at auction in London one of only three portraits that exist of Mehmet the Conqueror at a cost of almost a million dollars. Future visitors to the Hagia Sophia mosque — no longer required to pay the 100 Turkish Lira entrance fee — will be serenaded in parallel by the portrait of Mehmet the Conqueror when the municipality chooses to display it.

If the threat posed by Imamoglu's popularity was not enough, this year also saw the introduction of two new political parties: the Future Party, led by his former prime minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, and the DEVA party, founded by Ali Babacan, Erdogan's former deputy prime minister and longtime economy czar.

While these insurgent parties certainly pose no absolute threat in terms of numbers, they, along with other fringe parties, are chipping away at his once solid showing. With the opposition trending toward electoral coalitions, there could be trouble brewing for Erdogan's AKP and its nationalist coalition partner, the MHP.

There is no doubt that Erdogan believed the majority of Turkish citizens would accept the Hagia Sophia move, even if they were not die-hard fans of it.

Turkey is a country where religion and nationalism intersect, so that many of the staunchly anti-Erdogan camp would back the principle of Turkish sovereignty over the monument; upholding that prerogative absolutely would trump the debate of whether Hagia Sophia should be a museum or a mosque.

Erdogan was entirely aware of this and thus framed the Hagia Sophia issue in terms of sovereignty, downplaying obvious political or anti-secularist motivations: he was extremely careful not to set himself up as the anti-Ataturk, but rather as maintaining the founder's commitment to national sovereignty.

It may seem that framing an act that moves such a major monument out of the secular public space that Ataturk pioneered and protected as a continuation of that same founder's legacy is a sleight of hand, a form of doublespeak. But by using the sovereignty argument, Erdogan disabled protest, making pushback appear unpatriotic.

While Imamoglu has yet to comment since Erdogan's decree, he carefully told a forum last month that, "It's sad that such an issue is being instrumentalized for domestic political reasons." The former opposition candidate for president, Muharrem Ince, welcomed Erdogan's move; the head of the nationalist Iyi Party, Meral Aksener, also praised it, as did new party heads Davutoglu and Babacan and the opposition mayor of Ankara, a former nationalist who ran on the main opposition's CHP ticket, who also threw in his good tidings.

However, if Erdogan's strategy was to find a statist consensus, perhaps it worked too well. Turkey's opposition (mirroring the international community) opted to not inflate the issue, not to enter a wrestling match with Erdogan, who thrives off of such divisive issues, and where their counter-argument would be so open to attack.

The opposition knows that the vast majority in Turkey don't wake up in the morning, declaring, "I long to see Hagia Sophia turned into a mosque," but rather, ask themselves, "Do I have enough food to eat, and can I provide my family's basic needs?"

The Hagia Sophia decision may have boosted his brand as the confident leader of the faithful on the world (especially Islamist) stage, but it is the more "mundane" questions of survival that will determine the future of Turkey and its political parties, not performative symbolism like the status of Hagia Sophia.

Turkey's opposition has shown that it will not be easily enticed into controversies with dubious benefits but rather will choose its battles. And embedded in Erdogan's move is an ironic warning to him. Erdogan's decree was made possible by a Turkish court deciding that the 1934 change in Hagia Sophia's status from mosque to museum was an illegal act. Erdogan pushed to reverse a cabinet decree of Ataturk, and did so.

But if he seeks to reverse other Ataturk reforms, such as removing clauses related to secularism from the constitution, or returning the capital to Istanbul from Ataturk's choice of Ankara, he won't find such widespread support. The opposition has given him a free pass this time, but it comes with a reminder to Erdogan of his limits.

Turkey's opposition is focused on replacing him, even as Erdogan's authoritarian hold over the country seems tighter than ever, and they have the patience and strategy not to be unnecessarily distracted. That commitment to what once seemed like an impossible goal is a subversive analogy to Erdogan's long-held and once fantastical dream of "converting" Hagia Sophia. Perhaps Erdogan has actually just shown Turkey's opposition the way.

Louis Fishman is an assistant professor at Brooklyn College who divides his time between Turkey, the U.S. and Israel, and writes about Turkish and Israeli-Palestinian affairs. Twitter: @Istanbultelaviv