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**The Empire Strikes Back: The Arab World on the Decision to Convert
Hagia Sophia Back into a Mosque**

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The July 10, 2020 decision in Turkey to convert Hagia Sophia in Istanbul from a museum back into a mosque aroused, as expected, many negative responses in the Christian world. It was, however, also severely criticized by Sunni Muslims in Arab states. It was argued that the measure would help empower Israel to attempt to change the status of al-Aqsa, and showed that Turkey was a threatening revisionist player. On the other hand, some welcomed the decision, among them spokesmen from the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas – which reinforces the perception of Turkey as the leader of the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood axis.

On July 10, 2020, the Council of State, the highest administrative court in Turkey, revoked the Turkish cabinet's 1934 decision to turn the Hagia Sophia site into a museum. The current ruling paved the way for turning it into a mosque for the second time, despite American and European warnings against such a measure and severe criticism in the Christian world. In contrast, similar to the rhetoric coming from Turkey, official sources in Russia and Iran issued announcements stating that Turkey had the sovereign right to turn the museum into a mosque. Immediately after the court ruling, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan signed an order allowing the opening of the site for prayers on July 24, and transferred the authority over it to the Directorate of Religious Affairs.

Hagia Sophia, "the Church of Holy Wisdom," named as a world heritage site by UNESCO, was built under the Byzantine Empire, and is regarded as one of the most impressive structures from that era. The current Hagia Sophia building, the third attempt to build a church on the site, was constructed in the 6th century, and was the world's largest church for the next thousand years. In 1453, Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II (Mehmed the Conqueror) conquered the city of Constantinople, and made it the capital of his empire. Hagia Sophia became a mosque.

For many in Turkey, especially conservative Islamist groups, Erdogan's success in "breaking the chains" over Hagia Sophia realized the longstanding desire to see the site function again as a mosque. Erdogan's action positions him as continuing the path of the Ottoman Empire, and will clearly be a prominent part of his legacy. In addition to religious

rhetoric, Erdogan's statements also emphasize Turkey's right to decide its own internal affairs; he stated that foreign criticism on the matter was an attempt to interfere with Turkish sovereignty.

With few exceptions, the change in the status of Hagia Sophia was met in the Arab world with contemptuous rejection, scorn, and ridicule by political leaders and commentators, as well as in discussions on the social media. Exceptions included statements by Hamas spokesmen, who welcomed the "moment of pride for all Muslims," and spokesmen from the Muslim Brotherhood, who praised the return of Hagia Sophia to the site's "true status." Among Arab leaders, the criticism reflects concern about the regional ambitions of Erdogan, who regards himself as the leader of the Muslim world, and is perceived as seeking to rejuvenate the Ottoman legacy. They also fear internal political threats from the Muslim Brotherhood movement.

In Arabic language discourse on the social media, two explanations for the measure are suggested: one surrounding the political aspect, and the other focusing on identity. The dominant interpretation of the measure on the social media focuses on political motives. A decided majority among those who responded to the move regard the national-religious step by Erdogan at the present time as an attempt to divert attention from the coronavirus crisis and the severe economic ramifications it is causing. Many believe that Erdogan's rise to power and the support he has won over the years are a result of his success in rebuilding the Turkish economy following the 2001 economic crisis, and generating the economy's impressive growth rates, mainly in the first decade of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) rule. In recent years, however, as the Turkish economy has stagnated and unemployment rates have risen, Erdogan has lost support even among his political base. To these commentators, this negative trend peaked with the losses suffered by the AKP in the 2019 local elections in a number of important cities, particularly Ankara and Istanbul. The founding of two new political parties in Turkey in recent months by former members of the AKP – former Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and former Deputy Prime Minister, responsible for the Economy, Ali Babacan – was believed to mandate a significant response. Since the coronavirus has dealt a critical blow to tourism along with other economic sectors, Erdogan was forced to take demagogic religious steps that he previously avoided, among them turning Hagia Sophia into a mosque. *Al-Okaz*, the leading Saudi newspaper, expressed this bluntly in a leading headline: "The Sultan who Trades in Religion: His Popularity is Plummeting and the Economy is Collapsing."

Turkey was formerly regarded among large parts of Arab public opinion as an inspiring political model, particularly in light of its efforts to join the European Union. Early in the "Arab Spring," it was even considered an exemplar of moderate political Islam accompanied with economic success. Its image, however, has now been shattered. Already

before the Hagia Sophia move, Erdogan's autocratic tendencies eroded his positive image, and the pace of economic growth has also slowed significantly. Public opinion shapers and activists, primarily in Egypt, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, reacted negatively to the new status of Hagia Sophia: "Turkey is moving backwards toward religious intolerance. Ataturk [father of the Turkish republic], who wanted to demonstrate his secular agenda, turned Hagia Sophia into a museum, while Erdogan, who is on the run from the pandemic and the economy, prefers to regress to national religious propaganda, and to convert the museum into a mosque"; "The sultan is converting secular Turkey into a lame version of religious Pakistan"; and "A dark day for Turkey, a dark day for religious tolerance, a dark day for moderate Islam" were typical comments.

In addition to Erdogan's signature on the order turning the Hagia Sophia museum into a mosque, a large-scale propaganda campaign on both traditional and social media was launched. The contrast between Erdogan's statements in Arabic and English on Hagia Sophia was significant. The Arabic version of Erdogan's statement on Hagia Sophia is about its being a preliminary step to liberating al-Aqsa in Jerusalem while the English version is about sovereignty and tolerance. This in turn prompted severe criticism of Erdogan in Arab countries, together with an explicit warning that his statements would actually give Israel an excuse and legitimacy to adopt a similar policy. Former Lebanese Minister of Foreign Affairs Gebran Bassil tweeted biting, "Making Hagia Sophia a mosque is a falsification of history and an excuse for Israel to turn al-Aqsa Mosque into Solomon's Temple." Many Lebanese, mostly Christians, agreed with this criticism, and argued that the familiar rhetoric (from Nasrallah's speeches) promising the "liberation of al-Aqsa" was false and simplistic national Islamist propaganda.

Another aspect of the event indirectly concerning Israel, but no less important, is the change in the Arab narrative concerning the identity and characteristics of the main rival in the region. Since its establishment, Israel has been regarded as the primary adversary of the Arab world. For years, Arab leaders used anti-Zionist sentiments to divert public opinion from their failures in the internal sphere, and to generate identity and unity on the basis of a common enemy. Today, however, the trend has clearly changed. Among Arab leaders especially, and also among part of the Sunni Muslim public, Turkey, led by Erdogan, and political Islam, which Erdogan champions, are taking the place of Israel, which is losing its status as the primary regional threat. Turkey's efforts to promote an Islamist agenda and its military activity in Arab countries – Iraq, Syria, and Libya – likewise reinforce this trend. In addition to the Islamist agenda, political rivalry within the Sunni Muslim world between Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey for regional leadership has also stoked the enmity and enhanced the perception of Turkey as imperialistic and Islamist.

These changes in perception create an opportunity for Israel to improve its relations with pragmatic Sunni countries, but at the same time increase the tension between the region's rival camps. It follows, therefore, that Israel is increasingly likely to face difficult decisions regarding its willingness to side with the pragmatic Sunni countries in their disputes with Turkey.