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**THE POLITICAL RISK OF CONVERTING HAGIA SOPHIA BACK INTO A MOSQUE IN THE YEAR 2020**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Countries often have rich cultural backgrounds that are sometimes entwined with religion. While such complexities might be intangible, they sometimes have physical representations that might be in the form of monuments or buildings that have historical, cultural, and religious import. Further, these elements feed into the politics of a country due to their inherent significance and emotive nature. As a result, decisions involving the status of such matters carry internal political implications and, given the increased globalization of the world, also affect geopolitics and inter-country relations. In the early days of July 2020, the Turkish Council of State repealed the cabinet decree that had turned the Hagia Mosque into a museum<sup>1</sup>. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan would soon after sign a decree that transferred the administration of the mosque to the Presidency of Religious Affairs, which subsequently opened it to worship. Additionally, a Turkish court also annulled the decree that had turned the mosque into a museum in 1934<sup>2</sup>. This was not the first time the Hagia Sophia had changed hands. Emperor Justinian of the Justinian empire had the Hagia Sophia built as a church in 537. Centuries later, Mehmed the Conqueror would convert it into a mosque in 1453, and it would remain as such till 1934 when the now-repealed decree turned into a mosque. The momentous decision has far-reaching cultural and political implications given the centrality of the mosque to Turkish religiously charged politics. Despite the country priding itself as secular, 99% of its population is Muslim, with the other one percent being divided among various Christian denominations, Judaism, and other smaller religions<sup>3</sup>. As such, the Hagia Sophia is as much a cultural as a political symbol.*

**=KEYWORDS:** political risk, national identity, foreign affairs, political conflict

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## INTRODUCTION

### Hagia Sophia Ownership

Part of the problem with the Hagia Sophia is that due to its age and historical and cultural significance, no one group can entirely lay claim to its ownership. One cannot simply view it as a

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<sup>1</sup> Directorate of Communications. (2020). Presidential Decree on the opening of Hagia Sophia to worship promulgated on the Official Gazette. iletisim.gov.tr.

<https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/english/haberler/detay/presidential-decree-on-the-opening-of-hagia-sophia-to-worship-promulgated-on-the-official-gazette-of-the-republic-of-turkey/>

<sup>2</sup> Dal, A & Karadag, K. (2020). Turkey: Court strikes down Hagia Sophia museum decree. *Anadolu Agency*. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/turkey-court-strikes-down-hagia-sophia-museum-decree/1906171>

<sup>3</sup> European Commission. (2019). Turkey: Population: Demographic Situation, Languages and Religions. *eacea.ec.europa.eu*. [https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/population-demographic-situation-languages-and-religions-103\\_en](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/population-demographic-situation-languages-and-religions-103_en)

former church, a museum, or a mosque because it also tells the city's and the country's multi-cultural past and religious history. It also shows the conflict of ideologies that has been in the country for nearly a century. Given its initial status as a church, the Christian minority in the region sees it as a religious place of worship among Christians and members of the Orthodox Christian Faith<sup>4</sup>. On the other hand, the structure served as a mosque for centuries, and a significant part of its aesthetic structure is modified with symbols of the Muslim faith<sup>5</sup>. Aside from its importance to the Turks, the Hagia Sophia is also of global importance since it has been in the UNESCO World Heritage List since 1985<sup>6</sup>. As a result, it has been a tourist destination for millions of tourists who came to admire it as a museum.

### **Turkish national identity**

For one to understand the gravity and importance of the President's decision, they must first consider the role of Turkish national identity. The Ottoman empire had, for a long time, been one of the main global powers, and it lasted for more than six centuries. After WW1, the empire fragmented, and the Turkish republic came to rule over the heartland of the empire. The world expected that the new country would adopt western standards and habits. However, the centuries of Ottoman rule had left an indelible mark on the country's identity and composition. During the reign of the empire, the largest percentage of the populace that would form the new state identified as Muslim<sup>7</sup>.

Consequently, even in the formation of the country's identity, the elites had to battle against Islamism and religious influence, thus resulting in a complicated relationship between Muslims and secularists that has lasted till modern times. Some of the significant departures from Islamism included the abolition of the caliphate in 1924. It was a symbol that Turkey was leaving the

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<sup>4</sup> Avdoulos, E. (2015). Istanbul's Hagia Sophia: challenges of managing sacred places. Ucm.es. <https://eprints.ucm.es/36511/1/IstanbulHagiaSophia.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Avdoulos, E. (2015). Istanbul's Hagia Sophia: challenges of managing sacred places. Ucm.es. <https://eprints.ucm.es/36511/1/IstanbulHagiaSophia.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Avdoulos, E. (2015). Istanbul's Hagia Sophia: challenges of managing sacred places. Ucm.es. <https://eprints.ucm.es/36511/1/IstanbulHagiaSophia.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Schön, A. M., & Bijsterveld, A. J. (2013). The construction of turkish national identity: nationalization of islam & islamization of nationhood. *Avaiable at: <https://www.tilburguniversity.edu/sites/tiu/files/download/Anna%20Marisa%20Schoen>*.

conglomeration of Islamic states and taking up political secularization<sup>8</sup>. Other measures would include the adoption of western legal procedures in preference over traditional Sharia law<sup>9</sup>.

Even then, the country could not formulate its identity in a vacuum. There was a constant struggle between those who thought like Mustafa Kemal that Islam should just be a cultural element that supports the country's image, and the Islamists who would like to give Islamic religion more sway in political and social matters<sup>10</sup>. Consequently, attempts at promoting Islamism still have the underpinnings of a threat to the country's identity as a secular state. The current governing political party, the AKP, of which President Erdogan is a member, is a conservative Islamic party<sup>11</sup>. The party and the President have sought to use Islam not just as a cultural component but also as a guiding policy for state policy and politics. Hagia Sophia's conversion is, arguably, the most significant indication of the progressive Islamization of the country.

### Political risk

Kobrin cedes that there is a multiplicity of definition for political risk. However, there is an agreement in that there is an "implication of unwanted consequences of political activity."<sup>12</sup> In this particular case, the view that political risk is synonymous with political/politically motivated actions that could result in negative consequences or constraints<sup>13</sup>. Hagia Sophia's conversion is, inherently, a political event with local and international ramifications for the political and, consequently, the economic environment of the country. First, it is a risk due to its role in influencing religious and political sentiment among the predominantly Muslim citizenry. Since it is an emotive issue, it will undoubtedly influence how people view the President. Those that agree with the decision will view President Erdogan and his policies more favorably. On the other hand,

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<sup>8</sup> Schön, A. M., & Bijsterveld, A. J. (2013). The construction of turkish national identity: nationalization of islam & islamization of nationhood. Available at: <https://www.tilburguniversity.edu/sites/tiu/files/download/Anna%20Marisa%20Schoen>.

<sup>9</sup> Schön, A. M., & Bijsterveld, A. J. (2013). The construction of turkish national identity: nationalization of islam & islamization of nationhood. Available at: <https://www.tilburguniversity.edu/sites/tiu/files/download/Anna%20Marisa%20Schoen>

<sup>10</sup> Köker, T. (2010). The establishment of Kemalist secularism in Turkey. *Middle East Law and Governance*, 2(1), 17-42.

<sup>11</sup> BBC. (2019). Recep Tayyip Erdogan: Turkey's pugnacious president. BBC.com. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-13746679>

<sup>12</sup> Kobrin, S. J. (1979). Political risk: A review and reconsideration. *Journal of international business studies*, 10(1), 67-80.

<sup>13</sup> Kobrin, S. J. (1979). Political risk: A review and reconsideration. *Journal of international business studies*, 10(1), 67-80.

the minority non-Muslim percentage within the country might feel unsettled since the move is indicative of a country that is progressively moving towards fundamental Islamism.

The decision also has a significant risk in terms of its symbolism. Hagia Sophia is located at the heart of Istanbul, which adds to symbolic stature. Its location and status as a museum radiated secularism in the city and the country. However, now it acts as a beacon for Islam. It now poses a substantial risk for the country's global image. Foreign investors from western countries might be wary, while those from Muslim-dominant nations might be more willing to invest. Additionally, its conversion poses a global political risk. In its stature and significance, the Hagia Sophia museum served as a symbol of mutual understanding between the secular west and the majority-Muslim country. However, now that it is a mosque, it is a symbol of difference and confrontation.

### **Political instability in Turkey**

The justice and development party (AKP) under the leadership of President Erdogan has dominated Turkish politics for nearly 18 years. Over the years, he has progressively consolidated power around his person through strategic alterations of the country's executive system and attacks on political opposition. The trend has led to political tension within the nation, which culminated in an attempted coup by the military in 2016<sup>14</sup>. The unsuccessful coup led to further crackdowns on the media and other national institutions. However, since then, the country has had a fairly stable political environment. The stability might be to the iron-grip which the President has on the nation. Consequently, even if the conversion of the museum into a mosque might have been controversial in some circles within the country, the step did not have significant short term and actionable implications on political stability.

### **What does the decision mean for Turkey's economy?**

In an increasingly globalized world, no country can afford to discount the role of international business in its economy. Arguably, the most important element is making a country conducive to foreign investment. A nation must have a political environment that is conducive and enticing to potential investors since most organizations rightfully see it as a significant determinant of their decision whether or not to commit resources<sup>15</sup>. The environment is increasingly important since countries compete to attract firms. Further, even when a country has successfully managed to

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<sup>14</sup>THE ECONOMIST INTELLIGENCE UNIT. (2020) TURKEY: THE POLITICAL OUTLOOK FOR 2020. EIC.

[HTTPS://COUNTRY.EIU.COM/ARTICLE.ASPX?ARTICLEID=1358790719&COUNTRY=TURKEY &TOPIC=POLITICS&SUBTOPIC=FORECAST&SUBSUBTOPIC=COUNTRY+OUTLOOK](https://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=1358790719&country=turkey&topic=politics&subtopic=forecast&subsubtopic=country+outlook)

<sup>15</sup> Fitzpatrick, M. (1983). The definition and assessment of political risk in international business: A review of the literature. *Academy of Management Review*, 8(2), 249-254.

convince corporations to invest, they must also ensure that they are comfortable enough to stay. In some cases, a firm's political forecast, which might indicate that the firm might incur losses in the future, the firm might decide to cut its losses and leave the country before conditions deteriorate any further<sup>16</sup>.

Additionally, investment decisions often revolve around the risk vs. returns dynamic whereby risk alludes to the outcome is unknown and, consequently, might be negative. The political risk might encompass indications from events or the prevailing political atmosphere within the nation<sup>17</sup>. International enterprises are especially sensitive, given that they have to operate in a variety of nations with different political structures. While conversion of the Hagia Sophia might have some level of influence over the country's local firms, the impact on multinationals will be more significant. First, in international business, the relationship between the host country and a company's home country matters<sup>18</sup>. Sour relationships between the two nations might leave a firm in a vulnerable spot since it may inadvertently find itself in the crosshairs of conflict. If investors view the conversion of the museum into a mosque as an indication of progressive Islamization, they might stay away from the country since the situation might deteriorate even further in the coming years. The unwillingness to sink millions of billions of dollars into an unstable political environment would affect the country's economy since it would mean the loss of revenue as well as lost employment opportunities.

In light of the attempted coup and the resultant government crackdown, the country had not been conducive to investors in the past several years. However, since then, it has known relative peace and stability, albeit with a struggling economy. The Hagia Sophia's conversion comes closely on the heels of the country's offensives into Syria and Iraq. Consequently, Turkey is again under international scrutiny for a decision that most western countries might not support. The investors in these countries might see this as a foreboding of more political action or decisions that might affect the viability of the country as an investment location. Additionally, depending on the political response from members of the President's party as well as the main opposition party, the move might cause more tension in the country.

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<sup>16</sup> Brink, C.H. 2004. *Measuring political risk: risks to foreign investment*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing

<sup>17</sup> Al Khattab, A., Anchor, J., & Davies, E. (2007). Managerial perceptions of political risk in international projects. *International Journal of Project Management*, 25(7), 734-743.

<sup>18</sup> Lloyd, B. (1974). The identification and assessment of political risk in the international environment. *Long Range Planning*, 7(6), 24-32.

Further, the Hagia Sophia museum was Turkey's most popular tourist attraction. In 2019, it received nearly 4 million visitors<sup>19</sup>. Such a large number of tourists is bound to boost the country's economy since people who would come to see it would spend money and visit other sites. Now that it is a mosque, it might lose some of its allure to secular visitors who might keep away due to its association with Islam.

### **What will be decision's influence in Turkey's future political world?**

The decision to transform the museum into a mosque has been popular among the mainly Islamic populace, even with the criticism from secular groups as well as other countries and international bodies. Within the country, however, it is the reversion of the Hagia Sophia to its intended purpose and status. In the move, President Erdogan appealed the conservative elements of his power base due to the symbolism lent to the mosque. Additionally, its previous status as a mosque was an ever-present nod to western secularism, which conservative Turkish citizens are bound to be in opposition. As such, the move will further garner more support for the President in the future.

Given the sensitive nature of the matter, President Erdogan might have converted the museum into a mosque because he knew it would cause conflict and controversy. A politician might use conflict as a distractor from problems that would paint him in a bad light. The president's use of religious politics might be a distraction from the poor state of the country's economy. The nation's unemployment rate in 2019 hit its highest level in the last 19yrs<sup>20</sup>. The momentous decision could, therefore, distract the populace from the socio-economic problems facing the country if people get fixated, or it results in controversy from the country's opposition parties<sup>21</sup>. In this respect, Hagia Sophia's conversion might have given the president a short-term political benefit. Secondly, some political commentators view the action as President Erdogan's way of stoking identity conflict between conservatives and secularists since the mosque fits into a religion vs. modernity binary<sup>22</sup>.

Additionally, where the country has previously prided itself for being constitutionally secular, the decision moves Turkey's future politics further into the realm of nationalism and conservative fundamentalism. While this might be beneficial for the President as far as it concerns local support,

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<sup>19</sup> The National. (2020). Turkey's Hagia Sophia: five things to know. *The national.ae*. <https://www.thenational.ae/world/europe/turkey-s-hagia-sophia-five-things-to-know-1.1042993>

<sup>20</sup>Plecher, H. (2020). Turkey: Unemployment rate from 1999 to 2019. *Statista.com*. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/263708/unemployment-rate-in-turkey/>

<sup>21</sup> Çevik, S. (2020). Political Implications of the Hagia Sophia Reconversion. *German Institute for International and security affairs*. <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/political-implications-of-the-hagia-sophia-reconversion/>

<sup>22</sup> Çevik, S. (2020). Political Implications of the Hagia Sophia Reconversion. *German Institute for International and security affairs*. <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/political-implications-of-the-hagia-sophia-reconversion/>

it might sour the country's relationship with western countries. For instance, Russia, which has a substantial presence in neighboring Syria, was against the move and is, consequently, helping Syria build a replica of the Hagia Sophia<sup>23</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

The conversion of Hagia Sophia from a museum into a mosque seems more like a strategic political move rather than one driven by religion. The building's diverse history, centrality to Turkish identity, and its importance to the national community all have consequences on the political environment. While it might be advantageous for the President since it plays into his brand of politics, the political response from the international community might not be favorable.

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<sup>23</sup> The Moscow Times. (2020). Russia to Help Syria Build Replica Hagia Sophia Following Turkish Mosque Conversion. *themoscowtimes.com* <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/07/29/russi-to-help-syria-build-replica-hagia-sophia-following-turkish-mosque-conversion-a71009>

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