

After Hagia Sophia, Muslim Ruler Wonders, Why Not the Cordoba Cathedral?

by Hugh Fitzgerald



The ruler of Sharjah, among the lesser of the seven emirates that make up the UAE, has apparently been so impressed with Turkish President Erdogan's turning Hagia Sophia from a museum into a mosque that he has "demanded" – not asked, but demanded – that the cathedral in Cordoba be turned again into a mosque.

The story is [here](#).

The ruler of the UAE emirate Sharjah Sultan bin Muhammad Al Qasimi demanded Cordoba Cathedral in Spain be restored to a mosque on Thursday, [July 17] Arabi21 reported.

The former Cordoba mosque has been a cathedral since 1236. That cathedral was built within the mosque's outer walls, and

made use of the mosque's interior supporting columns, thereby avoiding damage to them. In his peremptory "demand," the Sharjah ruler forgets, or likely does not know, that the mosque itself was built by Abd al-Rahman in 784 on top of a pre-existing Visigoth church, the Catholic Christian Basilica of Saint Vincent of Lérins, that originally stood on the site. In 784, Abd al-Rahman I ordered the conversion of the church into a mosque.

Surely that means we are entitled to go back, not only before the period of the Cathedral, but back, too, before the Great Mosque of Cordoba was built, to the Visigothic church that was the original structure. If there were to be any change to the status of the Cordoba cathedral, it should recognize that the first building on the site was not a mosque, but a church. Which means that the Christians, not the Muslims, have priority. It's part of the argument that can be thrown back in the face of the Sharjah ruler Sultan Al Qasimi. But in any case, there is not the slightest chance that the Spanish government would accede to the demand that the cathedral be turned again into a mosque.

The Emirati leader said in an interview shared by Sharjah News: "At the very least, we demand the return of Cordoba Mosque, which was granted to the church, as this is a gift which doesn't belong to those who don't deserve it."

The Cordoba Mosque was never "granted to the church"; it was not a "gift" from the Muslims, but was seized from the Muslim invaders who had settled in Spain, by Christian warriors during their 700-year-long *Reconquista*.

This contradicts statements made by other Emirati officials criticising Turkey for its decision to convert the Hagia Sophia to a mosque.

Of all the Muslim countries, the UAE has been the most

critical of Turkey's decision to make Hagia Sophia a mosque again. And in the UAE, it has been Noura Al Kaabi, the Minister of Culture and Youth, who has been most outspoken.

"Humanity's cultural landmarks should be preserved for their value and function, and must " neither be misused nor altered " for personal purposes, said Noura Al Kaabi, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) Minister of Culture and Youth.

For Al Kaabi, the decision of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to turn the Basilica of Saint Sophia, now a museum, into a mosque deeply "touches the human essence" because the Unesco heritage site has "exceptional international value" for "all peoples and cultures."

The UAE Minister for Culture attacked any change to its status, which showed a disregard for its historical and human value, and she noted that it served "as a bridge connecting different peoples and cementing their bonds". Saint Sophia, she explained, "is a unique witness to the interaction between Asia and Europe across centuries. It is a symbol of dialogue."

While Al-Kaabi's words against the reversion of Hagia Sophia to its previous status as a mosque are welcome, they are not quite true. Hagia Sophia did not "serve as a bridge connecting different peoples and cementing their bonds," but was a symbol of Muslim supremacy during the almost five centuries when it served as a mosque. Nor was it a symbol of "dialogue," but a symbol, rather, of deep Muslim hostility to Christianity. The bells, altar, iconostasis, ambo and baptistery were removed, and relics destroyed. The mosaics depicting Jesus, his mother Mary, Christian saints, and angels were eventually destroyed or plastered over. Crucifixes were destroyed. Christians were prevented from visiting the mosque. None of this bespeaks the "dialogue" to which Al Kaabi so touchingly, but inaccurately, refers.

What Al-Kaabi might have said was this: "At different times in its history Hagia Sophia has been a church and a mosque. It then became – and should remain – a museum, for as a museum it is of exceptional value to Muslims and Christians alike, a unique witness to the interaction of peoples, and a symbol of what one hopes may become a real dialogue."

Besides Al-Kaabi, there have been other Emirati officials who were critical of the reconversion of Hagia Sophia from a museum to a mosque.

Emirati academic Abdul Khaleq Abdullah criticised the Grand Mufti of Oman for blessing the Turkish move, calling Erdogan a "malicious Ottoman" on Twitter.

Others have noted that "it has been a Catholic site since the Christian reconquest of the city in 1236, after which a cathedral was built inside the building.

Regarded as one of the finest monuments of Moorish architecture, the mosque-cathedral was added to UNESCO's World Heritage List in 1984.

The Cordoba Cathedral does not hide the Moorish origins of the building; almost nothing of the original mosque had been damaged in building the cathedral inside it, and those visiting the cathedral are made well aware not only of its history as a church, but also of the history of the mosque that preceded it, both by tour guides and pamphlets available onsite. Without a formal declaration of its status, the Cordoba Cathedral does double duty as both church and museum, and visiting Muslims should be pleased at the extensive attention now given to the building's pre-cathedral status as a mosque.

That solicitous attention already being given onsite to the Cordoba Cathedral's previous history as a mosque won't satisfy the Sultan of Sharjah. But the rulers of Abu Dhabi and Dubai

were displeased by Erdogan's mosque move, which surely means that they would not support the Sharjah Sultan's demand for the Cathedral in Cordoba to again become a mosque. And among the seven Emirates, Abu Dhabi and Dubai are the only ones that really count.

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