

How a Turkish Journalist Sees the Transformation of Hagia Sophia

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Memri.org has published [here](#) the summary of a debate between Syrian political analyst and a Turkish journalist, on the turning of Hagia Sophia into a mosque, followed by a transcript of excerpts from their debate.

Al-Jazeera Network (Qatar) aired a debate about Turkey's recent decision to turn Hagia Sophia into a mosque. Syrian political analyst Abd Al-Masih Al-Shami said that Hagia Sophia is being turned into a mosque in order to re-ignite the conflict between Islam and Christianity, and between Turkey and Europe. Turkish journalist Hamza Tekin said that Turkey is sending a message to the Muslim world that it is a strong Islamic country that can restore its historical days of glory, and that it is sending a message to the rest of the world that it is now capable of breaking the "spiritual shackles" that have been binding Turkey for the past 100

[sic]years since the Hagia Sophia mosque was shut down. Tekin said that Turkey can do as it pleases with Hagia Sophia, even if it wishes to demolish it or burn it down. In addition, he said that the light that will emerge from the first prayers in Hagia Sophia will stop the Deal of the Century and liberate the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Furthermore, he said that Turkish fighter planes are flying around the Greek Islands, promising that "something big" is going to happen there. He added: "Turkey will reclaim the rights that have been stolen from it everywhere!"

Abd Al-Masih Al-Shami: "The main purpose of this [Hagia Sophia move] is to rekindle Christian-Islamic strife, and to reignite [Turkey's] conflict with Europe, so that Erdogan can mobilize Muslims from around the world to fight his wars against the Christians and Europe."

Erdogan's message was not meant to "rekindle Christian-Islamic strife," which, as the past 20 years have shown, needed no rekindling. He hoped that Christians would quietly accept the change and was said to have been surprised at the outrage that his move provoked among the world's Christians, and dismayed that even the usually compliant Pope Francis declared he was "saddened" by the move. Erdogan's many wars right now, in Syria, Libya, and Iraq, and even in a campaign for Turkish influence in East Jerusalem, are all being conducted against fellow Muslims.

*Hamza Tekin: "Turkey needs to send a powerful message to the world, which still sees Turkey as a weak country that follows foreign dictates. The message of turning Hagia Sophia [into a mosque] is first and foremost a message to the Muslim world that Turkey has become a strong Islamic country that can return to its historical days of greatness, when the great Mehmed the Conqueror conquered Constantinople and spread the message to the entire Muslim world – particularly to Cairo, the capital of Egypt, where people praised his conquest. **This***

stands in contrast to today's Cairo, which is occupied by turban-wearers who attacked Mehmed the Conqueror and the re-conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque. They do this only because they work for the intelligence apparatus of the dictatorial regimes.

Is this true? How could anyone possibly think Turkey under Erdogan has followed "foreign dictates"? He's enraged the Americans, and his fellow NATO members, by buying the Russian S-400 missile defense systems and still expected to receive American F-35 planes, which the Russian experts who accompany the S-400 systems could then study for possible weaknesses in the F-35s ability to evade the S-400 defenses. Who "dictated" to Erdogan to enter Syria, where he ignored American requests to leave the local Kurds – who had been our best allies against ISIS – alone, and went to war against the Kurdish YPG forces, pushing them away from the Turkish border and further south? Who "dictated" to Erdogan that he should keep Turkish troops in Syria, as he has now said he will do "until Syria is free" of the Assad dictatorship, which means the Turks might be there for many years to come? Who "dictated" to Erdogan that he should enter northern Iraq to fight the PKK? And what "foreign" power dictated to Erdogan that he must send troops to support the GNA in Libya against the forces of General Haftar?

And what about Hamza Tekin's sneering reference to General El-Sisi and Egypt? El-Sisi was not alone in his dismay about Erdogan's move. Egypt's highest Islamic body, the Dar al-Ifta, condemned Turkey's intentions to turn Hagia Sophia into a mosque, and even described Constantinople as having been "occupied" by the Ottoman Turks, which enraged Ankara. There is clearly no love lost between Egypt and Turkey. El-Sisi, for his part, has been trying to reassure the Copts of his protection against Muslim extremists. Had he praised the transformation of Hagia Sophia into a mosque, that would have increased their own worries about the future of Coptic

cathedrals and churches in Egypt. He said nothing, but let Dar al-Ifta express what he was no doubt thinking. El-Sisi is justifiably alarmed about Erdogan's support for the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), which is El-Sisi's mortal enemy, and for Qatar, too, which alone among the Gulf Arab states supports the Brotherhood and is also friendly with Iran. Erdogan's Turkey has not been dictated to by anyone. His neo-Ottoman dream of expanding Turkish military and cultural power throughout the former Ottoman domains in North Africa and the Middle East is completely his own idea.

The second message of Hagia Sophia is to the entire world: Turkey is powerful today, and with the power it has achieved in two decades, it can now break the strongest spiritual shackles that bound it roughly 100 years ago. A hundred years ago, the entire world said that the Hagia Sophia mosque must be shut down – why? Because they understood very well the spiritual power of this glorious building.

What “power” has Turkey – or Erdogan – “achieved in two decades”? He has antagonized Turkey's once-strongest ally, the United States (even though Trump, puzzlingly, still claims to have a soft spot for Erdogan) repeatedly. He refused to allow the Americans to use the Incirlik Airbase to invade Iraq from the north. He angered not only the United States but other NATO members by insisting on buying the Russian S-400 missile system which the Russians might then test against the F-35s the Turks had assumed they would be buying (that deal has now been cancelled by the Americans). Erdogan thundered about the Mavi Marmara episode, walked off the stage to protest the presence of Israel's Shimon Peres in Davos, and published a plan for a pan-Islamic army capable of “destroying Israel.” He thus has made an enemy of the Jewish state, which once had good relations with secular, pre-Erdogan Turkey. Erdogan has berated Germany for not allowing his party to electioneer among Turks living in the country, and described Austrians as “Nazis” because it closed down some extremist mosques.

Finally, in claiming much larger territorial waters in the eastern Mediterranean than are recognized in international law, and in sending research vessels into the territorial waters of Cyprus and Greece, Turkey has managed to simultaneously infuriate Egypt, Israel, Cyprus, and Greece.

Tekin mentions the “strongest spiritual shackles” that Turkey, he claims, can now break. He is referring to what he sees as the “spiritual shackles” of secularism, of Kemalism. But Kemalism was an admirable attempt by modern Turkey’s greatest leader, Kemal Ataturk, to smash the retrograde power of Islam over the minds of Turks, in order to bring post-Ottoman Turkey into the modern world. Kemalism was the attempt to break what were truly “the strongest spiritual shackles” in which Turks found themselves – not secularism, as Hamza Tekin thinks, but the mind-forged manacles of Islam, which Ataturk’s reforms helped to free Turks from, until Erdogan arrived to undo what Ataturk had done, and subjugate the Turks to Islam yet again.

Tekin continues:

Today, Turkey is saying: ‘We will no longer be subjugated by the West or the East.’ This is a sovereign Turkish decision. Hagia Sophia is on Turkish soil and under Turkish control, and Turkey can do with it as it pleases. It can turn it into a mosque, it can demolish it, it can burn it down, or it can turn it into a church. It can do whatever it wants, but it has decided to make it [a mosque] again, as it had been in the past.

When was Turkey “subjugated by the West or the East”? It was the Ottoman Empire that did the subjugating of others, for nearly half a millennium. Does he mean that when Turkey was the Sick Man of Europe, and various Ottoman territories – Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria – were freed from, or freed themselves from, Turkish rule, that “freedom” amounted to the “subjugating” of the Turks? During the post-Ottoman period,

who “subjugated” Turkey? Turkey was long rewarded by the Americans – first with membership in NATO (a recognition of Turkey’s participation in the Korean War) – and then as a recipient of American military aid over many years. How does that constitute “subjugation”?

Of course Turkey can do “what it wants” with Hagia Sophia. And the rest of the world can do “what it wants” in response to the reconversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque. Many, in both the Christian and the Muslim countries, have denounced the move. It has done nothing to improve, and much to harm, Turkey’s relations with the rest of the world. It may also carry an economic cost, if Turkish tourism, an important source of the country’s wealth, suffers as a result of millions of offended Christians staying away from Turkey and what was once its greatest tourist attraction as a museum, but is now its grandest, largest mosque.

Turkey stands alone with a few other countries against the cursed Deal of the Century. Take my word for it, the light that will emerge from Hagia Sophia during the [prayers] on the 24th of July will stop the Deal of the Century, and it will soon liberate the Al-Aqsa Mosque.

July 24 came and went, and the only things now “stopping” the Deal of the Century have nothing to do with what happened in Istanbul. What has halted movement on the Deal of the Century are the complications resulting from the joint rule by Netanyahu and Gantz in Israel; the two leaders have been unable to agree on where, and in what order, the extension of Israeli sovereignty in the West Bank should take place, and until that internal disagreement is resolved, the Trump Administration has said it will not go forward with the Deal of the Century. Another factor has been the coronavirus epidemic, that has virtually monopolized the attention of both the American and Israeli governments. The “Deal of the Century” has now been halted, for how long no one knows, but

that has nothing to do with the muezzin's raucous wail now being heard from the minarets of what is now the mosque of Hagia Sophia.

Turkey has started to act in the Greek Islands. As we speak on this show, Turkish fighter planes are flying over the Greek Islands for the first time. We will see something big happening there. Turkey will reclaim the rights that have been stolen from it everywhere!"

In fact, Greece has stood up to Turkey twice recently. The Greek army and police have continued to prevent hundreds of thousands of Muslim "refugees" – in reality economic migrants – from being pushed into Greece by the Turkish military. And in a second move against Turkey, the Greeks warned Ankara not to send a research vessel, Oruç Reis, into Greek territorial waters. The Greek government declared it would do "whatever is necessary" to halt the vessel from entering its territorial waters. The ship, as a consequence, remained in port, at Antalya, and the Turkish warships that were supposed to accompany it returned to their ports without risking an engagement with Greek forces. What Turkey has managed to do is to antagonize all of its neighbors in the eastern Mediterranean by its claim of extensive – and unrecognized – territorial waters, and the oil and gas deposits that lie underneath. Egypt, Israel, Greece, and Cyprus have expressed anger at the Turkish move, and meanwhile, plans continue – despite Turkish opposition – for the building of the EastMed natural gas line, meant to bring natural gas from Israel's giant fields to Europe via Greece.

It's not hard to imagine how much better off Turkey would be if Erdogan had not been Erdogan, and left Hagia Sophia untouched. Imagine if he had announced to the world that "there are some elements in our country, and not only in our country, who want our government to change Hagia Sophia into a mosque. This we will not do. Hagia Sophia is a symbol of

coexistence. It is a World Heritage Site. It has been a church, and it has been a mosque. And as it has been for almost 100 years, so it will forever remain, a museum for both Muslims and Christians to admire, and a testament to Turkish tolerance." Plaudits, Pope Francis near tears in gratitude, ditto with the Archbishop of Canterbury, rumors that a Nobel Peace Prize should be in the works. And all for doing exactly nothing. But Erdogan, being Erdogan, could not help himself. And he's steering Turkey, from the Sea of Marmara to Antalya, from Idlib to Sirte, into some very rocky seas.

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