

Syrian Regime Emphasizes Its Protection of Christians By Building Miniature Hagia Sophia

by Hugh Fitzgerald



The story is [here](#):

The Syrian regime under President Bashar Al-Assad has announced that it will build a miniature replica of the Hagia Sophia, in opposition to the Turkish government's reversion of the building from a museum into a mosque.

"The construction of this mini Hagia Sophia, taking place in the central province of Hama, will be assisted by Syria's prominent ally Russia and will reportedly show the importance of "peaceful dialogue" between the major faiths.

This construction is a way to emphasize the Syrian regime's protection of its Christians, which has not always been understood in the Western world, hellbent as the media is in

presenting Assad in the worst possible light. The Assad regime, under both father and son, has always shut down the Syrian government on Christmas, and also allows Christians to publicly observe Good Friday, neither of which is allowed in any other Muslim-majority country.

According to the Lebanon-based news outlet Al-Modon, the idea for the building was initiated by a man named Nabeul Al-Abdullah, the head of a pro-regime loyalist militia within the province. After gaining the approval of the metropolitan bishop of the Greek Orthodox church in Hama, Nicolos Baalbaki, the plans were then presented to the Russian military within Syria.

The replica is to be built specifically in the Greek Orthodox-majority city of Al-Suqaylabiyah, on a piece of land donated by the militia leader Al-Abdullah; a Russian team within Latakia's Hmeimim military base is reportedly already working on plans for the construction.

Nabeul Al-Abdullah heads a militia loyal to the regime, a Muslim who wants to involve the Russians in his project as a way to secure his own future – possibly in Russia itself – should the Assad regime ultimately suffer defeat.

According to the Arabic-language newspaper Rai Al-Youm, Russian lawmaker Vitaly Milonov stated that Syria is the ideal location for the mini Hagia Sophia replica because “unlike Turkey, it is a country that clearly shows the possibility of peaceful and positive interfaith dialogue.”

While politically the Assad regime admits of no compromises, no “peaceful and positive” dialogue whatever with its enemies, as confirmed by its behavior during the last nine years of a ferocious civil war, in religious matters it does indeed stand, if not for a “positive interfaith dialogue”(there have been no signs of that) at least for the state's protection of the large Christian population in Syria.

The original Hagia Sophia, based in the city of Istanbul, was reverted back into the status of a mosque after the Turkish government overturned a 1934 ruling which made it into a museum. The historic building, which was initially built as a cathedral by the Byzantine Empire before being made into a mosque following the Ottoman conquest, has long been disputed over and many of those opposed to Turkey's decision argue that it should have been kept as a museum or turned back into a church.

Following the first Friday prayers held in the building after 86 years last week, countries such as Greece condemned the move and religious figures in Russia and the Catholic Pope in Rome expressed their disappointment.

Syria's aim to build a replica of the historic building is seen to serve as a gesture of revenge against Turkey, against whom it is fighting in the ongoing Syrian civil war. It is also a symbolic gesture by the Assad regime towards the Syrian Christian community, which it has posed as being a protector of, despite having targeted churches and persecuting Syrian Christians during the civil war.

Turkey's troops, originally sent to Syria by Erdogan in order to push back the Kurdish YPG forces from the Turkish border, will now remain, the Turkish President has said, "until Syria is free," by which he clearly meant "free from Assad's rule." Since Assad now controls 70% of Syria, those Turkish fighters will be there for a very long time to come.

Moscow's support and assistance towards the project, according to opposition activists who spoke to Al-Modon, is a method of justifying its military presence within Syria and its backing of Al-Assad based on Russian ties to the Syrian Christian community. The activists also said that the militia leader Al-Abdullah, who donated the land for the construction, aims to strengthen his ties with Russia in case

the Assad regime were to fall.

Russian participation in the project allows Moscow to present itself as a defender of the Christians in a Muslim sea, much as Russia did in the late nineteenth century, during the Ottoman period, in supporting the South Slavs in Serbia and Bulgaria in their struggles against their Turkish rulers.

By taking part in this project, Putin wins favor among the 300-million strong Orthodox community world-wide, and especially, gains support from the Orthodox Patriarch of Moscow and his flock of 90 million, a clear political plus for Putin at home, where he may even more convincingly play his role – despite his own atheism – as the Defender of Russian Orthodoxy.

The small-scale replica of the Hagia Sophia to be built at the Greek-Orthodox majority town of Al-Suqaylabiyah will, one hopes, be as true as possible to the original structure, ideally during the pre-Islamic period of its existence, and thus shorn of minarets. But artists who can produce anything like the Byzantine mosaics that adorn the walls of the real Hagia Sophia do not any longer exist. Would it be better to have some modern mosaics, which would only invite invidious comparison with those on the walls of the original Hagia Sophia, or none at all? Many questions remain.

Meanwhile, this small-scale version of Hagia Sophia in the middle of Syria will continue to remind the world's Christians of what, thanks to Erdogan, they have lost, though there is little danger of their forgetting. The Syrians think Erdogan will not be pleased. I think they're right.

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