

## HAGIA SOPHIA THE MOSQUE

## СВЯТАЯ СОФИЯ. МЕЧЕТЬ

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The 2020 conversion of Istanbul's Hagia Sophia, a key secular structure and as such an emblem of modern Turkey, to mosque, is a milestone for the resurgence of radical religiousness and a landmark decision directly enabled by the current president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The article looks at the historical roots of this move and seeks to show that it is a part of a clerical tradition that, while aided by the current policymakers, itself stretches in a direct and logical line back to the Ottoman Empire.

*Key words:* Hagia Sophia, Turkey, Atatürk, Erdoğan, Ottoman Empire, Caliphate, Sultanate, *Tanzimāt*, Kemalism, Islam

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Возвращение в 2020-с г. статуса мечети (Айя-Софии) византийскому собору Святой Софии Константинопольской, давно воспринимавшейся мировой общественностью как ключевое «светское» (музейное) сооружение и своего рода символ современной Турции, — знаковое событие в активизации религиозного радикализма, происшедшее непосредственно усилиями действующего президента Реджепа Тайипа Эрдогана. Настоящая статья рассматривает исторические корни этого решения и вписывает его в контекст клерикальной традиции, которая, хоть и была усилена действующими политиками, тем не менее явным и логическим образом обнаруживает истоки еще в Османской империи.

*Ключевые слова:* Святая София, Айя-София, Турция, Атаюрк, Эрдоган, Османская империя, халифат, султанат, Танзимат, кемализм, ислам

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Fig. 1. [Hagia Sophia and] Augustaion. Artistic rendition of Hagia Sophia prior to the Conquest by Antoine Hilbert

See: URL: <https://www.roger-pearse.com/weblog/2017/12/20/the-amazing-drawings-of-constantinople-by-antoine-hilbert/>



On July 24<sup>th</sup> 2020, Turkey's president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (b. 1954) musically and movingly recited the first chapter of the Quran as the almost 1500-year-old Hagia Sophia (*Fig. 1*), the most famous building in Istanbul once again freshly made a mosque, hosted a major celebratory day of prayers. Importantly, this particular Friday also happened to be the 97<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the Great War<sup>1</sup>'s final peace agreement — the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), when modern Turkey, carried by the brilliance and strategic vision of its founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk<sup>2</sup> (c. 1881–1938), reaffirmed its sovereignty.

Yet it is hard not to see the irony in the confluence of the two events. Whereas Atatürk intended to put his country on a firm secular footing and Westernise it<sup>3</sup>, Hagia Sophia's newly-enforced religious affiliation is not simply a move in the opposite direction but seemingly a well-designed affront to the West as a whole, interwoven with referenc-

es to Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror (1432–1481) that to a European ear sound as thinly veiled threats of a reverse crusade. Indeed the global outcry that followed this event was unanimous and joined secular and religious voices alike, as if lamenting the loss (again) of one of the great places of worship; not merely a museum, no matter how emblematic, but the last vestige of Byzantium, the iconic mainstay of Christian faith. Equally feverish was the reaction of the side that gained (the side that had for some time referred to Hagia Sophia and similar cultural sites, such as the equally ancient Chora Church, as “stolen” sanctities or mosques), with many praising President Erdoğan as a true Muslim leader and a model for other such leaders to follow. Perspective needs distance, however, and much as it may be tempting to indulge in sensational historical analogies or sorrowful political analysis, this article instead seeks to offer some introductory synthesis that might explain how events of 2020 came to pass.

1 The First World War (1914–1918).

2 For simplicity, “Mustafa Kemal” and “Atatürk” are used interchangeably throughout the text (even though Mustafa Kemal only became Atatürk on Nov 24<sup>th</sup> 1934). So (although less frequently) are “Turkey” and the “Ottoman Empire”.

3 Most discussions of Atatürk herein rely in one way or another on [Mango, 2004]. For a closer source, see [Яковлев/ Yakovlev, 2020].

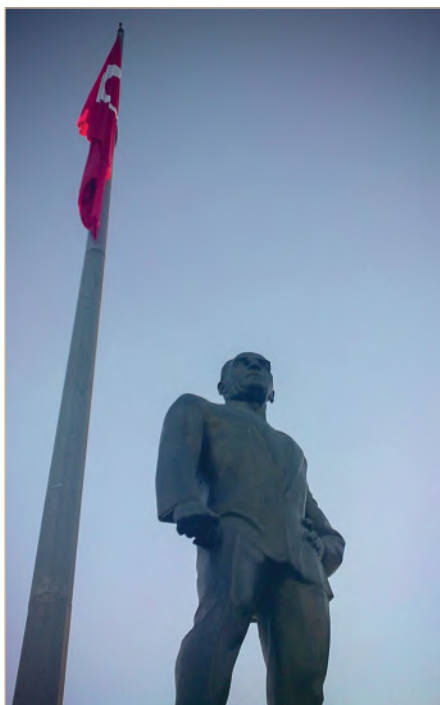


Fig. 2. A monument to Atatürk in modern Istanbul. Photo © Dinara Dubrovskaya

Few things are more striking to an unprepared eye than the omnipresence of Atatürk's images in Turkey (Fig. 2). In their multitude, they stand out even amidst the wildly picturesque and colourful fabric of the country's everyday life. The great statesman and the founder of modern country (while also "the greatest general of the Ottoman Empire" [Bay, 2011]) is to be found everywhere: on banknotes, on walls, in books, newspapers, museums and on T-shirts — so much so that it taxes one to say if there is anything or anyone equally deeply embedded in, and universally shared by, the collective psyche of the

modern Turkish people. Indeed, imagery of Atatürk is so prevalent that a European observer more used to a landscape free of political adoration soon suspects the Turks of nurturing "the world's longest-running personality cult"<sup>4</sup>, benevolent though it may be.

For a Westerner, there is one simple way to reconcile that devotion, and most importantly Atatürk's consistently secular stance, with (1) the religious<sup>5</sup> sentiment that has now claimed a landmark achievement — the conversion of Hagia Sophia back to mosque 85 years after it was made a museum<sup>6</sup>; and (2) the apparent pan-Turkish play of President

4 Personality cults are associated with repressions and atrocities, which is why applying this term to the *generally* benign reign and legacy of Atatürk may seem unfair, if not iconoclastic. But it isn't, and this pairing has a history of its own, with this particular statement being due to: Christie-Miller. Lookalike keeps alive the cult of Atatürk. *The Times* (2013). URL: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/lookalike-keeps-alive-the-cult-of-Atatürk-7zgg25k799d> (accessed: 28.09.2020).

5 Perhaps a more fitting broader term would be *conservative*; however, one is hesitant to use it, as its meaning has metastasised well beyond its original Aristotelian/Burkean [Burke, 1790] domain and tends to polarise readers unnecessarily.

6 Hagia Sophia is an ancient place of worship. The first great church here was built c. 346, but the place already had religious significance before. The present building, commissioned by emperor Justinian I (482–565), was completed in 562. The church was then converted to a mosque following the fall (or the taking!) of Constantinople in 1453; and, having served as such for half a millennium, was made a museum in 1935. It was then officially decreed by the Turkish Council of State to be used as mosque alone on July 10<sup>th</sup> 2020, through President Erdoğan's tireless efforts. (One wonders when this decision, too, shall fall to the onslaught of history.)





Fig. 3. **Hagia Sophia and the year of the coronavirus.** Photo © Reuters

See: URL: <https://www.dailysabah.com/arts/hagia-sophia-the-treasure-of-sultan-mehmed-the-conqueror/news>

Erdoğan in Nagorno-Karabakh that unfolds as this article goes to press. As any Turk by fact of birth alone has to be on *some* side of Atatürk, this apparent contradiction resolves easily if Erdoğan is seen as some sort of anti-Atatürk (which he has been dubbed by, for example, [Bakshian, 2013]), come to dismantle the foundations laid by the father of the nation. Correspondingly, the blame for what is happening — or the praise, depending on the camp one belongs to — is to be laid squarely at his feet.

This author feels, however, that the answer is slightly more nuanced, and as such should apply equally well

to many other countries that are similarly “regressing”, acted upon by forces that to a casual observer seem to have emerged out of the woodwork<sup>7</sup>; and this answer is, in a nutshell, “things hadn’t changed quite as much as we thought they had”.

Turkey was never quite secular in the European way. Even though it had a succession of enlightened rulers, and not just Atatürk alone, and its attempts to expunge religion from the affairs of the state weren’t confined to Mustafa Kemal’s momentous effort, seen against the backdrop of late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-century history, recent political developments

7 The sudden resurgence of Confederacy-related ideology and aesthetics in the United States, for example, is another manifestation of the same polarising phenomenon when a leader who successfully flirts with disenfranchised demographics by feeding them gaudy slogans is seen by many as either (1) the offender, solely responsible for igniting fires of ignorance; or (2) the saviour, arrived to deliver the masses from suffering and debasement. In reality he is neither, but the general public rarely chooses nuance over summary judgment.



in Turkey are but a natural outcome of an old undercurrent that never really stopped. President Erdoğan did not magically undo decades of social evolution with a series of ingenious strategically-timed blows; he simply breathed yet more life into already powerful religious institutions (conveniently inflating his own personality cult in the process). But crucially, these institutions were never absent from Turkey's political stage — at most, they were briefly dormant as the country was finding its sea legs — and there was no part in the post-Ottoman history of Turkey when Islam wasn't part of the country's core identity — indeed, the minarets in *Fig. 3* are very much a part of Hagia Sophia's familiar exterior.

It is well known that the rulers of the Ottoman Empire laid claims to supreme religious leadership beginning from the empire's inception in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and that, for more than four hundred years, the empire *was* the seat of the chief authority of Sunni Muslims — the Caliph, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques<sup>8</sup> (with said authority vested in the Sultan). The emblematic importance of this institution to Islam, however, must be emphasised separately. The Caliphates proceeded in a practically unbroken 13-century-long chain from Abū Bakr (c. 573–c. 634), the successor (*khalif*)<sup>9</sup> to the Prophet Muhammad (c. 570–632) himself, and, if only in concept, were a unifying agency for the vast majority of Muslims — a societal and spiritual pillar surviving from the times when they were a tightly knit and flourishing community<sup>10</sup>. Strictly in terms

of its global reach and consequence, therefore, the Caliphate could be likened to the papacy; and, even though such a comparison is crude and may sound sacrilegious, this author isn't the first to make it [Oliver-Dee, 2009, p. 227] — in fact, Atatürk made it himself<sup>11</sup>, although not in a favourable way.

Its central position to the Islamic world notwithstanding, though, in its last century and a half the Ottoman Empire certainly wasn't excessively religious<sup>12</sup>. Sultan Selim III (1761–1808) was an enlightened ruler who in late 18<sup>th</sup> century attempted to reform the Ottoman army and ended up being deposed by the radically conservative Janissaries. The *Tanzimāt* (Re-organisation) of 1839–1876, conceived of by Sultan Mahmud II (1785–1839) and spanning four subsequent Sultans<sup>13</sup>, sought to modernise and Westernise the Empire by increasing tolerance of religious diversity and adopting progressive practices across all spheres of life. Abdulmejid II (1868–1944), the last Caliph (who held the title after the last Sultan, Mehmed VI (1861–1926)), was a European-educated musician and artist who died in exile in Paris on the day it was liberated from German occupation. The late modern history of the House of Osman, regardless of how critically one wishes to look at it, shows no lack of figures or movements wishing to re-shape society or at least deeply influenced by European values, specifically the values of the Enlightenment — and not only because a constant expectation of war necessitated that. The Ottoman Empire was as enam-

8 The Al-Haram Mosque (*Al-Masjid al-Harām*) in Mecca and the Prophet Mosque (*Al-Masjid an-Nabawī*) in Medina.

9 [Lane, 1863–1893] chooses to render this word as *Khaleefeh* and gives a lengthy description of its possible meanings and possible translations, among which there are “a successor: and a vice-agent, vice-gerent, lieutenant, substitute, proxy, or deputy”.

10 It is unsurprising al-Qaeda and ISIS (both of these organisations are outlawed in Russia) tried to hijack the legitimacy of the ancient institution and did that partly by painting a picture where the Ottoman Caliphate was seen as the later heyday of Islamic state-making, a model to be emulated. In reality, however, the Caliphate, regardless of its long and venerable history, wasn't some flawless pan-Islamic egreore holding sway over, and accepted uniformly, by all *ummah* (faithful); as any such complex and old religious body, it was fraught with problems and complications, and its authority was rarely absolute or uncontested. The author will neither go into greater detail in this article nor (obviously) refer to any extremist writings, but for a good and succinct refutation of ISIS's talking points, see, for example, [Awan, 2016] or [Hussain, 2011].

11 In his address on Caliphate delivered to the Grand National Assembly in 1924.

12 In course of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century reforms, for example, homosexuality was decriminalised (!); stoning was abandoned; and so was the death penalty for apostasy (abandonment of religion or its key tenets).

13 Mahmud II (r. 1808–1839) laid the groundwork for the reforms before his death, whereupon Abdulmejid I (r. 1839–1861), Abdulaziz (r. 1861–May 1876), Murad V (r. May–Aug 1876), and Abdul Hamid II (r. Aug 1876–1909) all implemented *Tanzimāt* ideas with varying efficiency and dedication.



Fig. 4. **President Erdoğan.** Photo © Turkish presidential service/AFP/Getty

See: URL <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/24/erdogan-prayers-hagia-sophia-museum-turned-mosque>

oured, both secretly and openly, of contemporary Europe, as is modern Turkey (notice how men in *Fig. 4* are dressed) — and, in both cases, this led to a rather paradoxical position where Turks were often seen in their own country as something of a lower caste, and perceived themselves likewise (for a literary reflection on this, read Orhan Pamuk's *Istanbul* [Pamuk, 2006], or see, e.g., [Earle, 1925]).

But regardless of the infatuation, even the more progressively-minded parts of the establishment

never had the intention of making a clean break with either religion as a whole or even with its more influential institutions. Besieged by great powers that were in turns belligerent and friendly<sup>14</sup>, and existing in a perpetual state of war or preparation thereto, the Empire sought to increase its efficiency and strength by building on some of the more successful economic, military and to a lesser degree social practices it tried to borrow from Europe<sup>15</sup> — but never, of course, to reinvent itself net of its Islamic

14 Loyalties shifted liberally during the 19<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the Anglo-Ottoman War of 1807–1809, the Ottoman Empire was supported by France against the British and Russian Empires. In the First Egyptian-Ottoman War of 1831–1833, Britain, France and Russia (especially) helped Sultan Mahmud II to suppress Muhammad Ali, the Albanian Ottoman governor of Egypt (1769–1849). In the Crimean War of 1853–1856, the Ottoman Empire, France and Britain fought against the Russian Empire (and Greece). In the First World War, by way of a reminder, the Central Powers (the Ottoman Empire, Germany and Austria-Hungary) fought practically all of Europe, including Russia, Britain, and France. Finally, in the War for Independence (1919–1922), the Turkish National Movement faced France, the UK, the US, Ottoman Empire royalists and some others (Russia was meanwhile rather busy domestically). In World War II, Turkey remained effectively neutral, thus breaking with its Ottoman tradition of belligerence.

15 The Imperial Reform Edict of 1856 (*Hatt-ı Hümayûn* originally or *Islâhat Fermânı* in modern Turkish), generally considered part of broader *Tanzimât*, a fundamental attempt at handling religious inequality in economic and legal treatment of the state's subjects, was widely seen by both the laypeople and religious elite alike as pandering to the interests of Europe that had only recently helped Turkey in its Crimean war with Russia.





Fig. 5. **President Atatürk**

Photo © Neos Kosmos.

See: URL <https://neoskosmos.com/en/136913/aturks-famous-words-part-of-the-mythology-of-war-but-few-australians-are-aware-of-his-dark-legacy/>

roots. With firmly three quarters of the population being Muslim<sup>16</sup>, the absolute primacy of Islam was never in question, and it was in a great part the resulting half-heartedness in the implementation of different reforms that ultimately made the Ottoman Empire further disoriented (hence the all too famous “sick man” sobriquet), with none of its key institutions — save perhaps for the dresses worn by the rich and powerful — fully reformed per their intended European blueprints<sup>17</sup>.

With the Great War upon it, a state already so torn asunder from within could not hope, of course, to survive, and the Ottoman Empire didn't. Although its actual dismantling began much earlier, in 1908 with the Young Turks' Second Constitutional Era (1908–1920), and its noticeable deterioration arguably more than a century earlier still, the humiliation was decisively sealed by the Occupation of Constantinople<sup>18</sup> by the Allies in 1918 (which also, interestingly, saw Hagia Sophia being temporarily converted “back” to a cathedral). It took another four years of death throes for the fabric of the state to disintegrate sufficiently for the Sultanate to be abolished painlessly (Nov 1<sup>st</sup> 1922) — after more than six centuries, the House of Osman was

no more; and another year and a half to abolish the Caliphate (March 3<sup>rd</sup> 1924). And, because it is all too tempting to bucket change together, humour the author as he sets up a convenient strawman. Let us imagine that this newly born country started *ex nihilo*, a Kemalist victory amidst the ruins of the old regime, much like one imagines USSR emerging from the smoking carcass of the Russian Empire. Now let us look at this strawman more closely with one key question: was it born, indeed, from a wholesale revolution? — and, in function of that, consider the violence, the continuity, and the man in charge.

Firstly, the votive sacrifice, which is historically a necessary complement to any revolutionary business (much as it must be repulsive to any rational statesman)<sup>19</sup>. Mustafa Kemal's milieu indeed dealt the old empire the final blow by removing the two key institutions previously mentioned. But that blow was not part of a carefully conceived, nurtured and implemented tactic of bloodshed; it was a mere *coup de grâce*, a necessity in their fight for the integrity and wholesale enlightenment of their homeland — the same homeland which Europe “proper” sought to partition and subjugate. Rep-

16 See the 1914 Ottoman census in [Karpat, 1985, pp. 188–190]. While Karpat himself warns repeatedly against major data inaccuracies, the overall share of Muslim population around 75–85 % is hardly contentious.

17 It is not this author's position, either express or implied, that Turkey failed to modernise because of Islam alone. The issues are rather those of common causality and mutual reinforcement.

18 Or of Istanbul, if one follows Turkish sources.

19 There is no lack of historical examples showing how the advance of change necessitated institutionally killing some wrong people — sometimes the figureheads alone, as with the Interregnum of 1649–1660 in England, Scotland and Ireland; sometimes up to ¼ of the population, as with Khmer Rouge. We are not rehashing these familiar facts and statistics here: they are too numerous, too nauseating.



representatives of the last Sultan obediently signed the humiliating **Treaty of Sèvres** (1920) which left Turkey practically a protectorate of the major nations. It fell to Mustafa Kemal's circle (the Grand National Assembly, GNA) to utilise whatever means necessary to invalidate that treaty and, albeit through war (1919–1923), reassert their nation's right to independence and identity, culminating in the aforementioned **Treaty of Lausanne** and the present borders and sovereignty of Turkey. And none of that involved any ideological killings: the Ottomans were compensated for many of their possessions and chivalrously exiled, not robbed and slaughtered.

Secondly, the sweeping change introduced by Atatürk was indeed revolutionary in scope and effect. But he neither created nor rode a revolutionary juggernaut (although it is enticing to see the 1926 attempt on his life as revolution attempting to devour its children). It was the demonstrable inability of the ailing Ottoman Empire to stave off the preying Allies — to the extent that the country's capital was held by them for five years — that levelled the playing field for Mustafa Kemal and his associates. And it is obvious from Atatürk's demeanour (*Fig. 5*) that he was not a revolutionary in the common sense of the word any more than Marx (1818–1883) was a Marxist<sup>20</sup>; his interactions with Ottoman statesmen, even when he was already in a position to disregard them or dispose of them entirely, were never short of cordial. But most importantly, the vast majority of changes envisioned as Atatürk's reforms did not in any way break with the spirit of the *Tanzimāt* — and were rather organically developed and implemented by graduates

of modern schools established during the *Tanzimāt* era. To the extent that one sees revolution as a dissociative fugue on a state-wide scale, therefore, this certainly did not apply to Turkey: if anything, Atatürk originally wanted to halt the deterioration of his homeland, not bring it about.

Thirdly and finally, Atatürk's attitude to religion is frequently misrepresented or misunderstood. It is true he was not an ardent believer; he neither came from a religious family nor got a religious education like Erdoğan. But he probably wasn't an atheist — his upbringing was fully a function of the society he was born into — and although his policies were very clearly directed at the separation of religion and state and secularisation of the country, he didn't imply that Islam should be purged from the life of Turks — merely that its reach be constrained to the domain of spirituality and stripped of political or economic ambition. Certainly, if 20<sup>th</sup>-century attempts at reining in religion were to be ranked by severity, Turkey's modernisation efforts would only barely register — while Kemalist policies are sometimes called “ultra-secular” or lamented by the religious part of the Turkish population, it should be fairly evident to even the most relaxed student of history that this is not what ultra-secularism looks like<sup>21</sup>.

We must re-iterate, therefore, that Atatürk never entertained the end ambition either to destroy the Ottoman Empire or to get rid of Islam, and the change effected by him was profound and far-reaching, but comparatively nonviolent and ideologically expected. Unlike hot-headed revolutionaries keen to demolish the old world only to then experiment amidst its smouldering wreckage<sup>22</sup>, he was never in-

20 This is an intentionally provocative reference, of course, to Marx's famous “Si c'est cela le marxisme, ce qui est sûr c'est que moi, je ne suis pas marxiste” (“If this be Marxism, then what is certain is that I am not a Marxist”), uttered in frustration over **French Worker's Party** (1880–1902). Mustafa Kemal was in much better control of his ideology — perhaps because it was much better contained.

21 One only has to turn to the USSR, where physical eradication of clergy and churches was institutionalised for the larger part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to understand that even Atatürk's Turkey was very loyal to its clerics indeed.

22 Such as Şevket Süreyya Aydemir (1897–1976), the extremely left-leaning ideologue of *Kadro*, a prominent political magazine that was only published between Jan 1932 and Jan 1935 and lent a lot of its thinking to Kemalist policies (although its ideology was never fully embraced by Atatürk's entourage). Interestingly, *Kadro* was in the end shut down by the same person who sponsored the revival of Islam — Mahmut Celâl Bayar (1883–1986), later Turkey's third President (1950–1960) and founder of the Democrat Party.





Fig. 6. Dr Ali Erbaş delivering a sermon on Hagia Sophia's conversion to mosque. Photo © DHA. See: URL: <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/sermons-with-swords-part-of-turkeys-tradition-head-of-diyamet-says/news>

terested in an abstract brave new world and instead always had in front of him the society towards which he wanted Turkey to evolve: Europe. In *that* particular resolve, importantly, he wasn't categorically different from the Ottoman reformers who predated him by half a century or more. He was simply more efficient and — through the circumstances that forged him as one of the foremost statesmen of the 20<sup>th</sup> century — not a hostage to outdated institutions, expectations, and customs.

The view that Atatürk “betrayed Islam”, as primitive as it is catchy and oft-uttered<sup>23</sup>, has therefore little basis in reality. It is this author's firm belief that Mustafa Kemal *was* in a position to cleanse Islam from Turkey, had he so desired. After all, the post-war country was weak, while his support, including that of the army, was strong. But paradoxically, his intention was quite the opposite. Kemalists

(again in keeping with the late Ottoman tradition of trying to prioritise the affairs of the state over religious zealotry) attempted — specifically by making Muslims practice their faith in Turkish as opposed to Arabic — to *re-apply* Islam to the new country. To them, it had to be a religion of an individual, freely and consciously practiced by choice, not obligation — as opposed to being a collection of mystic rites holding sway over many, yet understood and managed by the chosen<sup>24</sup>. (Nowhere is this seen more clearly, in fact, than in the Article 2 of the Turkish Constitution of 1924, which says, “The religion of the Turkish State is Islam; the official language is Turkish; the seat of government is Angora”<sup>25</sup>.) A stark example of this is **the ban on the Arabic call to prayer**, easily *the* litmus test of the degree of secularism ever achieved by Turkey [Azak, 2008]. The ban was widely seen as an

23 Such opinions are indeed abundant, but they are mostly found outside of contexts we could mention here. One interesting if controversial example is the sermon read by Dr Ali Erbaş (b. 1961), the country's top imam and head of the country's key religious institution — the *Diyanet* — on Friday, July 24<sup>th</sup> (the aforementioned date when Erdoğan led with a recital of Quran in Arabic). Wielding a ceremonial sword (signifying that the *mosque* was attained through conquest), the country's head cleric said, “any property that is endowed is inviolable in our belief and burns whoever touches it; the charter of the endower is indispensable and whoever infringes upon it is cursed”. Some (Dr Erbaş himself first, of course) dismissed it as a mere formulaic statement; others saw in it a curse directed straight at Atatürk, and therefore nothing short of treason.

24 Arabic belongs to Afro-Asiatic language family (Semitic branch); Turkish, to Turkic (Common Turkic branch). The two languages do not converge even at family level, and they are thus more genetically distinct than, say, Russian and Welsh. And so while learning and reciting a prayer or a religious text in Arabic may be a relatively simple matter of rote memorisation, truly understanding it remains either the privilege of the duly educated few or the province of native speakers. The combined population of both these categories, it seems, is not more than 2–3 % [author's own estimate based on publicly available data] of Turkey's population. For a good discussion of the history of Turkish-Arabic language interplay see [Strauss, 2008].

25 The current Constitution of 1982 makes no reference to any official or preferred religions.



emblematic move and a landmark victory of Kemalists; yet surely a measure that merely requires that faith be practiced in a less obscure and more accessible way, and in parallel arms the faithful with tools to do so, cannot be considered wholly anti-religious? So the year 1950, when this ban was lifted as anti-Islamic — a mere 12 years after Atatürk's death, when many of his allies were still politically active — is a clear watershed, and needs to be addressed as such.

Under the Ottomans, all key affairs of religion were dispensed by the Ulema, an ancient and rigid hierarchy of Muslim clerics headed by a Sheikh ul-Islam, whose authority extended even to the confirmation of the new Sultan (while he was the highest practicing religious authority in the land, the Sheikh was nevertheless subordinate to the Caliph). As the “six arrows” of **Kemalism** pierced the many aspects of Turkish life, however, the office of the Sheikh (*Şeyhülislâmlık*) was disbanded together with the Caliphate and the network of *medreses* (religious schools) and dervish *tekijes* (lodges), depriving the Ulema of control over education and legal jurisdiction, and giving way instead to a much smaller *Diyanet*, the Presidency of Religious Affairs (1924).

But the *Diyanet* did not somehow erase Ulema from existence, of course. Instead it absorbed it: bureaucracies are immortal unless directly targeted, and we have already shown there was no destructive zeal directing the state's interaction with religion. And so while this structure was originally given a legislative bloodletting, and intentionally deprived of control over mosques and personnel, it was not exsanguinated entirely. So therefore when in 1950 the Democrat Party came to power with the explicit intention to restore Islam to what it saw as its proper place<sup>26</sup>, the *Diyanet* never lacked for motivated and familiar human resources (*Fig. 6*). It swiftly regained control over almost all aspects of religion and has been growing and increasing in power ever since (the coups of 1960 and 1980 only serving to further strengthen and broaden its reach), in the

21<sup>st</sup> century particularly enjoying unprecedented economic support from President Erdoğan. Today it is a large, powerful, untransparent, autonomous, for-profit structure that reaches well beyond Turkey (“highly intricate, interwoven, and interconnected component of Turkey's international strategies and foreign policy” [Yakar, Yakar, 2018]) and is present in many domains from providing religious services abroad to construction to education to ritual animal slaughter, all along tasked with one core activity: the advancement of Islam.

It was hence the very central qualities of the founder of modern Turkey — his habit of measured calculation, his thorough dislike of needless damage, and his desire to bring as many of his countrymen with him into the new era as he could — that equipped first his later contemporaries and then by extension modern politicians with just the right tools to supplement, almost a century later, Atatürk's enlightened and moderate secularism with sectarianism. As one accesses the website of the *Diyanet* to read about a conference called to extol Hagia Sophia's re-forged religious affiliation against the background of arts, sciences and history, one cannot help but be alarmed by the neighbouring messages, replete with warlike rhetoric surrounding the events unfolding around the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The global indignation about the conversion of Hagia Sophia and Chora Church (*Fig. 7*) — both of which, this author believes, should be recognised as museums and monuments to human genius and spirit, transcending any specific faith — to mosques, therefore, is an understandable reaction to the **weaponisation of religion**, which hitherto, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, was thought to be firmly in the domain of fringe groups, rogue or failed states, or terrorist organisations.

Yet it is still fairer to say that President Erdoğan and his attendant institutions, including the *Diyanet*, are not so much on a mission to dismantle the legacy of Atatürk as to further the legacy of Fatih Sultan Mehmet, “Father of Conquest”, the original

26 Which included, among other things, lifting the ban on call to prayer in Arabic, radio broadcasts of religious programs, and reintroduction of Islamic instruction in schools.



Fig. 7. **Former Chora Church, since Aug 21st 2020 the Kariye Mosque.** Photo © tunart/Getty Images  
See: URL <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/turkey/istanbul/attractions/kariye-museum-chora-church/a/point-sig/402174/360887>

man who made Hagia Sophia a mosque. Certainly, while Mustafa Kemal would not have approved of President Erdoğan's *modus operandi* (based, it seems, on systemically alienating one part of the country while securing the whole-hearted support of the other<sup>27</sup>), it is disingenuous to believe he would have been surprised by it. Over the past century, Turkey sadly failed to notably close the income gap with developed economies — to quote [Pamuk, 2007], “The income per capita gap between Turkey and the high income countries of Western Europe and North America was about the same in 2005 as it was on the eve of World War I”. And it was prosperity that Atatürk wanted for his citizens first, not irreligiosity (this was to be a matter of personal choice): Where economic disenfranchisement rules the day, religion predictably rises to fill in the void,

often with the added bonus of a desirable supra-national identity and the unstoppable urge to rally around the flag. It is hardly any fault or distinction of President Erdoğan's, therefore, that he is opting for the easy short-term solution, especially given that Islam globally does seem to be in want of a proper champion. The vast majority of politicians in his place would have, and have, done the same — only without the privilege of making Hagia Sophia an ally.

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<sup>27</sup> The support of which also lately seems to be wavering. See: Hoffman M. Turkey's President Erdoğan Is Losing Ground at Home. *Center for American Progress*. URL: <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2020/08/24/489727/turkeys-president-erdogan-losing-ground-home> (accessed: 16.10.2020).





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