

Arabs React to Erdogan's Big Plans

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Al Aqsa mosque interior

Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan vowed to “liberate al-Aqsa mosque” from Israel after “resurrecting Hagia Sophia” as a mosque on Friday [July 10]. The story is [here](#).

The decision to change the status of the ancient Hagia Sophia church, which had been transformed into a mosque in 1453 and then into a museum in 1934, was made controversially last week.

It follows an increasingly religious authoritarian agenda from Ankara that has made Turkey the world's largest jailer of journalists, seen dissidents imprisoned for “terrorism” and witnessed increasing military invasions of neighboring

countries by Turkey.

The resurrection of Hagia Sophia heralds the liberation of the al-Aqsa mosque, the Turkish Presidency website says. "The resurrection of Hagia Sophia is the footsteps of the will of Muslims across the world to come... the resurrection of Hagia Sophia is the reignition of the fire of hope of Muslims and all oppressed, wrong, downtrodden and exploited."

Erdogan likely thought that the change in the status of Hagia Sophia would be celebrated by Muslims all over the world, but it hasn't turned out that way. He claims it has brought about the "reignition of the fire of hope" among Muslims, but so far, an insignificant handful of Muslims have praised the "reverting" of Hagia Sophia to its previous status as a mosque. There have been no delirious demonstrations, nor indeed demonstrations of any kind, among Muslims worldwide, save in Turkey itself. Praise came from one minor figure in Pakistan, a local assembly leader of little consequence, one Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi. Nothing was heard from Imran Khan, or any other national figure. The Arab Maghreb Union, which is merely a trade group, expressed support, but there was silence from the *maghrebin* leaders in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya. The Grand Mufti of Oman, Ahmed bin Hamad al-Khalili, expressed his support, but no other religious or political figures among the Gulf Arab states did so. The Muslim Brotherhood was pleased – but praise from the Muslim Brotherhood is not exactly helpful to Erdogan's image and cause, given how many Muslims regard the MB as a mortal threat. Ekrema Sabri, the preacher of Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque, was satisfied. And finally, the terror group Hamas praised the move: "The opening of Hagia Sophia to prayer is a proud moment for all Muslims," said Rafat Murra, head of international press office of Hamas, in a written statement. And that was it. Nothing from Egypt, the U.A.E., Jordan, Iraq, Syria, Iran. Nothing from Kuwait, Bahrain, Yemen. Nothing from Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya. Nothing from Indonesia,

Bangladesh, Afghanistan. Nothing from the Arab League or the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

What surely amazed and disappointed Erdogan was how, with 1.5 billion Muslims in the world, save for the handful of positive responses I've listed, there were no public expressions of support from Muslim leaders. In Saudi Arabia, not only was there no support, but instead fury that Erdogan had unnecessarily antagonized the entire Christian world without, in the Saudi view, accomplishing anything of real value for the world's Muslims.

The speech [by Erdogan], which was in Turkish, was translated slightly differently in Arabic and English, apparently as a way to hide part of Ankara's full views on how it has linked Hagia Sophia to a wider agenda.

In Arabic the speech says that turning Hagia Sophia into a mosque is part of the "return of freedom to al-Aqsa," essentially meaning Israel should be ejected from controlling Jerusalem's Old City where al-Aqsa is located.

Perhaps Erdogan wanted to appeal, in the Arabic version of his speech, for Muslim Arab support – that has so far not been forthcoming, save from the half-dozen individuals and groups that I've listed above – to the change in status of Hagia Sophia, by presenting it as a kind of condition precedent to the next step, the conquest of Al-Aqsa.

What Erdogan does not realize is that the Arabs are alarmed by Turkey's moves to extend its influence and power in Jerusalem, and especially in the Old City. A war for influence in East Jerusalem has been brewing between Turkey and certain Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia, over the Turkish attempt to expand its power in Jerusalem. The Turkish government has offered trips to Turkey for Jerusalem Arabs, has delivered aid to Arab neighborhoods, has even supplied teachers to the city's schools. Turkey's sustainable investment in Jerusalem

is multi-dimensional, through a series of civil bodies, NGOs and grassroots organisations undertaking charitable initiatives and educational programs for the benefit of the Palestinian Arabs. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Association (TIKA) ,with its headquarters in East Jerusalem, has invested millions of dollars in the restoration of the Old City of Jerusalem and the provision of food parcels to vulnerable people there. It has also supported businessmen and entrepreneurs. Arabs in east Jerusalem have been seen waving Turkish flags.

All of this worries the Jordanians and the Saudis, who recognize that Erdogan would like to extend Turkish influence over the Waqf that administers Al-Haram Ash-Sharif (the Temple Mount), including Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock. The Saudis are now in talks with the Israelis and Jordanians over possible Saudi participation with Jordan in the administration of the Waqf, which until now has been completely in Jordan's hands, in order to keep Turkey out.

Turkey's president linked the decision to reviving Islam from Bukhara in Uzbekistan to Andalusia in Spain. This terminology, linking al-Aqsa in Jerusalem to Hagia Sophia and Spain, is a kind of coded terminology for a wider religious agenda. In the Turkish translation the same reference to Spain does not appear to be included as in the Arabic.

Erdogan mentions Spain in the Arabic version of his speech. He apparently did not realize that mentioning Spain in such a context – that of Turkey leading a neo-Ottoman caliphate, stretching from Bukhara to Andalusia – would only anger many Arabs, who consider Spain to belong by right to them, as it was the Arabs, and not Turks, who possessed Islamic Spain for 700 years; Spain was never part of the Ottoman Empire.

As for “liberating Al-Aqsa,” to many Muslim Arabs it already seems “liberated.” In 1967 Israel handed administration of the

Temple Mount (with Al-Aqsa and the Dome of the Rock) back to the Waqf, under Jordanian custodianship, while maintaining Israeli security control. Israel has bent over backwards to be solicitous of Muslim sensibilities. Jews and Christians are allowed to visit the Temple Mount only at certain times, and they are prohibited from praying or singing on the Temple Mount. Jordan, through the Waqf, is responsible for all other administrative matters. I suspect that the Arabs collectively will be as unenthusiastic about Erdogan's attempt to expand Turkish power and influence in Jerusalem – perhaps by winning over Palestinian Arabs to demand that Turkey be allowed to take part in the administration of the Waqf – as they were in 2018 about Erdogan's plans for a pan-Islamic army.

First published in