

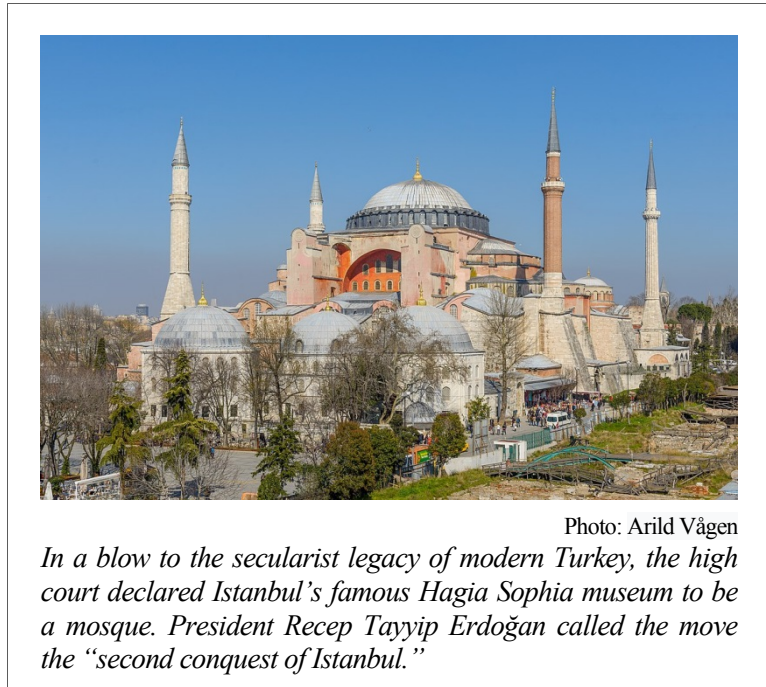
## *Turkish Imperialism*

# Erdoğan's "Second Conquest" of the Christians

by Anne-Christine Hoff

On July 10, 2020, Turkey's high administrative court annulled a 1934 cabinet decision that had turned Istanbul's famous Hagia Sophia mosque into a museum, dealing a further blow to the secularist legacy of modern Turkey's founding father Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Shortly afterward, a presidential decree transferred the site's ownership from the ministry of culture to the directorate of religious affairs (*diyanet*), and two weeks later, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan made a nationally televised speech where he lauded the move as the "second conquest of Istanbul" and a major step to the "liberation" of the al-Aqsa mosque.<sup>1</sup>

What does this Islamist grandstanding mean for Turkey's 175,000-strong Christian community?<sup>2</sup> Does it herald the looming demise of this community just as the 1453 Ottoman conquest of Constantinople and the conversion of its grand Hagia Sophia cathedral to a mosque signified the destruction of Eastern Christendom?



<sup>1</sup> Raul Redondo, "The Islamic Reconquest of Istanbul," *Atalyar* (Madrid), July 13, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> "Turkey," Open Doors USA, Santa Ana, Jan. 14, 2020.

## The Symbolism of Hagia Sophia's "Reconversion"

Erected in 537 CE by the Byzantine Emperor Justinian I, the Hagia Sophia cathedral was hugely significant for Eastern Christianity and has maintained its importance for the Greek-Orthodox Church to date. This explains its swift conversion to a mosque by the conquering Sultan Mehmet II as a triumphant act over Christianity and the widespread opposition in the Turkish republic to the mosque's conversion to a museum by its modernizing founding father. Repeated attempts have long been made to revert it to its former status.<sup>3</sup> "Ayasofya is a symbol for the Islamic world and the symbol of Istanbul's conquest," argued the head of the Anatolia Youth Association, which in 2014 collected fifteen million signatories for a petition calling for the mosque's restoration. "Without it, the conquest is incomplete, [and] we have failed to honor Sultan Mehmet's trust."<sup>4</sup>

Small wonder that the court's restoration of the Hagia Sophia mosque was celebrated in grand style. On July 24, 2020, the day Erdoğan made his televised speech, the president of the Turkish religious authority Ali Erbaş mounted the pulpit of the once great Byzantine cathedral, adorned by two green flags as a symbol of conquest, to deliver a sermon titled, "Hagia Sophia: Sign of Conquest, Our Trust in the Fatih [Mehmet II 'The Conqueror']." With Ottoman sword in hand, Erbaş harkened back to the days of the prophet Muhammad, "who gave the good news about the conquest by saying, 'One day, Constantine will be conquered; great is

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3 Efrat Aviv, "Erdoğan's 'Holy Wisdom'—Why He Is Converting Hagia Sophia into a Mosque," BESA Center Perspectives Paper, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, no. 1,646, July 16, 2020.

4 Reuters, [May 30, 2014](#).

the commander who will conquer it and great are his soldiers."<sup>5</sup>

The Islamist *Gerçek Hayat* magazine, known for its close association with Erdoğan,<sup>6</sup> took the significance of Hagia Sophia's reconversion a big step forward. Running a front-page story in its July issue, it suggested that the time had come for restoring the caliphate. The article featured the Ottoman red caliphate flag and a text that read in Arabic, Turkish, and English: "Get together for caliphate. If not now, when? If not you, who?"<sup>7</sup>

## Asserting Islamist Supremacism

The "second conquest of Istanbul" might have been Erdoğan's latest feat of Islamist grandstanding, but it was by no means his only recent bid to dismantle Atatürk's secularist legacy and reassert Islam's supremacy over Christianity. Thus, for example, after prolonged negotiations over the reopening of the Greek Orthodox Halkı seminary outside Istanbul (which had been closed since the early 1970s) as the only operational Christian seminary in Turkey,<sup>8</sup> in 2018 the Diyanet president announced that a new center of Islamic studies spanning an area of two hundred acres would open less than a mile away from the former Orthodox seminary.<sup>9</sup>

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5 *The Siaset Daily* (Telangana, India), [July 24, 2020](#); Giulio Meotti, "Turkey's Hagia Sophia: It's Like If St. Peter's Had Been Turned into a Mosque," Gatestone Institute, July 12, 2020.

6 "Gerçek Hayat," *Albayrak Medya Grubu* (Istanbul), Jan. 4, 2018; *Ahval News* (Cyprus), [May 13, 2020](#).

7 *Middle East Eye* (London), [July 28, 2020](#).

8 "Greece-Turkey Relations Could Be Improved by Reopening a Historic Seminary," *The Economist*, [Feb. 15, 2019](#); *Orthodox Times* (New York), [July 6, 2020](#).

9 *Kathimerini* (Athens), [Sept. 8, 2018](#).



Following the Battle of Manzikert, Sultan Alp Arslan is said to have placed his boot on the neck of Byzantine emperor Romanos IV Diogenes. The emperor's humiliation is depicted in this 15<sup>th</sup> century painting.

The symbolism of this act could not be lost on the Greek Orthodox Church. It was a deliberate, state-directed action to impede the ability of the country's Christians to regenerate and grow a future generation of clergy; it indicated a clear intention to intimidate the practitioners of the dwindling Christian legacy into submission and eventual silence. This goal was further evidenced by the deportation (in 2018-20) of more than fifty foreign Christian pastors (most of whom were married to Turkish citizens) on the pretext of constituting a threat to Turkish national security.<sup>10</sup> With no foreign Christian ministers and no functioning

10 Jill Nelson, "Turkey Erases the Hagia Sophia's Christian History," *The World and Everything in It*, podcast, July 16, 2020.

indigenous seminary, the future of the clergy in Turkey remains uncertain. Christians with means may be able to study abroad, but the increasing difficulties for Turkish citizens to obtain visas for study in the United States or other Western countries make the possibility of study abroad highly challenging.

In a similar act of religious assertion, in 2019, the government decided to transform the Kariye Museum, formerly the Church of St. Savior in the Chora, from a museum into a mosque, meaning that its 1,500-year-old mosaics and frescoes, considered to be amongst the foremost remaining Byzantine artifacts, must either be covered or, more likely, plastered over to allow Islamic services inside the building.<sup>11</sup>

The targeting of this particular church has much to do with the thoroughly Christian themes depicted in its mosaics and frescoes. A room dedicated to the ancestors of Christ shows thirty-nine figures from Adam to Jacob's twelve sons. Its "Cycle of Subjection" art series, "a favorite theme for pictorial treatment on the walls of important churches in the Byzantine world,"<sup>12</sup> depicts the healing of the blind man in Jericho, the miracle of water turned into wine, the birth of Mary, Joseph receiving the rod as successful suitor of Mary, the Apostle Peter with the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven in his hand, Mary receiving bread from archangel Gabriel, and Herod inquiring of the rabbis where the child Jesus will be born.<sup>13</sup> In a country where it is hazardous to obtain a Bible, the pictorial narration of the Christian biblical story via church frescos and mosaics is seen as a clear and present

11 *Asia News* (Bangkok), [June 11, 2019](#).

12 Alexander Von Millingen, *Byzantine Churches in Constantinople: Their History and Architecture* (London: Macmillan and Company, 1970), p. 327.

13 *Ibid.*

danger that needs to be removed so as to assert Islam's supremacy and suppress Anatolia's Christian roots.

In yet another act of Islamist supremacism that same year, Erdoğan inaugurated the Camlica Mosque. The 150,000-square-foot complex sits astride a hill on Istanbul's Asian side of the Bosphorus; four of its six huge minarets—representing the six articles of the Islamic faith—commemorate the victory of the Seljuk Turks over the Byzantines in the 1071 Battle of Manzikert and the capture of their emperor.<sup>14</sup> According to tradition, after discovering the emperor's identity, the sultan placed his boot on the vanquished ruler's neck and forced him to kiss the ground, before forcing him to surrender the Anatolian cities of Antioch, Edessa, Hierapolis, and Manzikert. Many historians view this territorial loss as paving the way to the Turkification of Anatolia and the eventual fall of Constantinople.<sup>15</sup>

### Anti-Christian Incitement

Nor was the dissemination of the regime's supremacist, Islamist narrative confined to prominent acts of religious assertion. Consider, for example, the popular TV series *Resurrection: Ertuğrul*, which was featured on Turkey's state-run TRT1 channel for five seasons (2014-19) and now streams through Netflix all over the world. The series depicts the Turkish campaign against Byzantium and the crusading forces in Anatolia beginning in the thirteenth century as a noble, heroic fight against oppressive and immoral Christian invaders. These Christians are portrayed as



*The popular series, Resurrection: Ertuğrul, on Turkey's state-run TV, depicts Christians as massacring Turkish populations in order to relegate the Turks to obscurity.*

having no scruples or qualms about plundering Turkish lands and massacring their populations in order to subordinate and relegate the Turkish nation to obscurity.

Over the years, the president's office has promoted the show both in words and in deeds. In July 2015, Erdoğan visited the *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* filming set and posted a press release and video of the visit on the official presidential website.<sup>16</sup> When two years later a famous talk show host mocked the series while hosting an award ceremony in its honor, he was peremptorily fired from his well-paying job, and Erdoğan responded to the controversy by praising *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* as a voice for the pious, conservative masses: "Until the lions start writing their own stories, their hunters will always be the heroes."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> TRT World TV (Istanbul), [May 3, 2019](#).

<sup>15</sup> John Julius Norwich, *A Short History of Byzantium* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), pp. 240-1.

<sup>16</sup> "President Erdoğan Visits Set of *Dirilis Ertuğrul*," Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, Ankara, [July 6, 2015](#).

<sup>17</sup> "Erdoğan: We Will Write Our Glorious History the Way It Was," *Turkish Minute* (Hamburg), [May 19, 2017](#).

*Resurrection: Ertuğrul* seems to have taken up Erdoğan's incendiary narrative of "a bitter struggle between the crescent and the cross" in which, according to *Hurriyet Daily News*

editor William Armstrong, Turkey had "a unique mission as the heir of a great empire; a nation founded by men of strength, courage and wisdom."<sup>18</sup> According to some estimates, the show's YouTube channel has garnered 2.9 million subscribers and 515 million views. In addition, *TRT Ertuğrul* by PTV YouTube, a channel targeted at Pakistani audiences, has been viewed more than 100 million times, reaching over one million viewers and almost 11 million single views in the first two weeks after its initial upload.<sup>19</sup>

Other government-controlled or associated media outlets were used—especially after the abortive 2016 coup—to amplify the narrative about the supposed threat to Turkey from internal and external enemies, with the attendant escalation of anti-Christian incitement and hate speech. In 2017, for example, a flurry of local media outlets across the country ran publications and broadcasts connecting churches with terror organizations or foreign countries. Such media accounts were defended, despite Christians' complaints, by claims to freedom of speech.<sup>20</sup>

In its May 2020 issue, *Gerçek Hayat* magazine ran a 176-page special edition

**Government-controlled or associated media were used to escalate anti-Christian incitement and hate speech.**

accusing three prominent Turkish non-Muslim religious leaders—the Eastern Orthodox Church ecumenical patriarch, Turkey's chief rabbi, and the former Armenian patriarch of Constantinople—

of masterminding the 2016 coup attempt and having connections to the banned Gülenist movement (or FETO).<sup>21</sup>

Erdoğan's own rhetoric has similarly grown more overtly Islamist and anti-Christian, deriding Atatürk's secularist legacy as an attempt to take on a Christian identity that was anathema to the Islamic peoples. In Erdoğan's view, this "Christianization drive" extended not only to the territory of the newly-established Turkish republic but also to the lands of the defunct Ottoman Empire. As he put it:

Those who think that we have erased from our hearts the land from which we withdrew in tears a hundred years ago are wrong. We say at every opportunity we have that Syria, Iraq, and other places in the geography [map] in our hearts are no different from our own homeland. We are struggling so that a foreign flag will not be waved anywhere where adhan [Islamic call to prayer in mosques] is recited. The things we have done so far [pale in comparison to the] even greater attempt and attacks [we are planning for] the coming days, inshallah.<sup>22</sup>

18 William Armstrong, "What a TV Series Tells Us about Erdogan's Turkey," *The New York Times*, May 14, 2017.

19 *Daily Sabah* (Istanbul), [May 15, 2020](#).

20 "2017 Human Rights Violation Report," Association of Protestant Churches, Izmir, Jan. 30, 2018.

21 "Turkish Christians Targeted in Hate Speech," [Persecution.org](#), May 12, 2020.

22 Vasileios Meichanetsidis, "Turkey's Jihad in Syria," *Greek City Times* (Sydney), Mar. 17, 2020.

This “struggle” to prevent a foreign (i.e., Christian) flag from waving in Muslim Ottoman lands has become a standard neo-Ottoman rallying cry following the abortive 2016 coup. Thus, for example, the government used similar language to justify the year-and-a-half detention of American pastor Andrew Brunson (2016-18), during which time Erdoğan proposed his release in exchange for the extradition of Pennsylvania-based Turkish clergyman Fethullah Gülen,<sup>23</sup> whom Erdoğan held culpable for the 2016 coup. When this deal failed to materialize, with Washington sanctioning two senior officials involved in Brunson’s detention and doubling metal tariffs on Turkey, Erdoğan decried these moves and warned of an “economic war” against countries that know “no laws or justice,”<sup>24</sup> and the Turkish government moved forward to prosecute Brunson. Invoking, among other things, the testimony of anonymous witnesses accusing the pastor of “Christianization activities” aimed at sowing division within Turkey,<sup>25</sup> the indictment said that Brunson would face up to thirty-five years in prison if convicted.<sup>26</sup> Despite his conviction on the charge of aiding and abetting terrorism, Brunson was sentenced to time served and allowed to leave Turkey in another indication of the religious-political nature of the entire episode.<sup>27</sup>

**Erdoğan is determined to advance the dissolution of Atatürk’s secularist legacy.**

## Conclusion

The use of Ottoman symbols of conquest in both the Hagia Sophia “reconversion” ceremony and the inauguration of Istanbul’s Camlica Mosque complex offers a vivid illustration of Erdoğan’s determination to advance his neo-Ottoman ambitions, including the dissolution of Atatürk’s secularist legacy and the further decimation of Turkey’s Christian minority. For, rather than seek to curb the nationwide spike in anti-Christian hate speech in the five years attending the 2016 coup, the government has fueled this combustion through a systematic policy of Islamic supremacism. This has ranged from straightforward acts of Islamic and neo-Ottoman assertion as in the cases of the Hagia Sophia and Camlica inaugurations, to TV series glorifying Turkish triumphalism over Christian invaders, calls by government-affiliated magazines to restore the caliphate, accusations of domestic subversion against prominent Christian religious figures, and disruptions to the education of future generations of Christian clergymen. This in turn leaves Turkey’s Christians with one of four similarly stark choices: exile; continued acquiescence in their longstanding third-class status; fighting that status at the risk of being mercilessly crushed; or conversion, in the hope of full integration in Turkey’s Islamic order of things.

**Anne-Christine Hoff** is an assistant professor of English at Jarvis Christian College in Hawkins, Texas.



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<sup>23</sup> *The New York Times*, [Aug. 1, 2018](#).

<sup>24</sup> Reuters, [Aug. 10, 2018](#).

<sup>25</sup> Open Doors USA, [June 20, 2018](#).

<sup>26</sup> Reuters, [Sept. 28, 2017](#).

<sup>27</sup> BBC, [Oct. 12, 2018](#).