

Turkey 're-conquers' Hagia Sophia amid international disapproval

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Sat, 2020-07-25 22:43

ISTANBUL: Istanbul's Hagia Sophia on Friday hosted its first Islamic prayers in 85 years, despite fierce criticism of the Turkish government's campaign to revert the building to a mosque after being a museum for decades.

For President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the much-publicized congregational worship represented the "conquest" of the 1,500 year-old domed monument. Curtains hide Christian mosaics and symbols at prayer times. The head of the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs, Ali Erbas, gave the Friday sermon with an Ottoman sword in hand. He read verses about conquest from the Qur'an and gave a stirring, almost provocative speech about "the ones" who turned the Hagia Sophia into a museum being "damned," an indirect reference perhaps to the founder of the Republic of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk.

Supporters of the conversion campaign saw its successful outcome as a source of national and religious pride, while opponents were concerned about keeping modern Turkey's secular legacy intact.

The monument is on the UNESCO World Heritage list and last year attracted 3.7 million visitors, making it one of the top tourist destinations in the country.

UNESCO as well as authorities in Washington, Moscow, Brussels and Athens expressed their concerns about Turkey's unilateral actions.

Berk Esen, a political analyst from Ankara's Bilkent University, said that although there had been strong objections in some quarters to the conversion, the international response had mostly been mute.

"Obviously, the decision is generally unpopular abroad but few governments took strong notice amid the continuing pandemic," he told Arab News.

"Nonetheless, converting the Hagia Sophia's status to a mosque will be seen by many international observers as yet another move by the Erdogan government to destroy Turkey's secular regime and its links to the West."

There were protests in Greece on Friday against Turkey's decision and, according to Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, what happened at the Hagia Sophia was "not an indication of power" but a "sign of weakness." Athens said that the latest move would burn bridges between Turkey and the West.

Esen added that Erdogan appeared to have failed to generate sympathy and support in the Muslim world.

"On Erdogan's part, this decision was taken straight out of the populist playbook of changing the public debate and energizing one's voter base by exploiting a cultural significant issue."

He regarded it as a "desperate attempt" to reassert control over the public debate and cater to the Islamist base.

"When coupled with the opposition's decision to not challenge the Hagia Sophia move, Erdogan is left with few opportunities to exploit this issue to

mobilize his base and polarize public opinion,” he added. “The government’s decision does not resolve any of the major problems facing Turkey in the coming months and may turn into a Pyrrhic victory for Erdogan, who finds himself more removed from the swing and undecided voters.”

According to Ozgur Unluhisarcikli, the Ankara office director of German Marshall Fund of the United States, Erdogan’s push to turn the Hagia Sophia back into a mosque and start hosting prayers had two main goals.

“Erdogan’s first goal was leaving a strong legacy as the leader who re-Islamized Hagia Sophia which he would be remembered by right-wing conservatives for generations to come,” he told Arab News. “I believe that he has reached this goal.”

His second goal was to trigger a culture war which he could not lose and the opposition could not win.

“However, the opposition rejected being lured into such a controversy, denying Erdogan his culture war. The international impact of the decision will be limited as Turkey’s image in the West is already very negative and there is not much room for worsening,” he added.

EU-Turkey relations are already strained by Ankara’s energy exploration in disputed East Mediterranean waters. The issue of the Hagia Sophia has added to the caseload, showing Turkey’s defiance on contentious issues preoccupying the international community.

During the past few weeks, the EU’s top diplomats urged Ankara to hold off on the conversion project, but Turkey insisted it was a national sovereignty issue.



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Turkey condemns Greek reaction to Hagia Sophia prayers 'Power, politics' behind move to convert Hagia Sophia into mosque: Leading Muslim cleric

[Kuwait to lift lockdown in Farwaniya on Sunday](#)

Author:

Reuters

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1595702639079426500

Sat, 2020-07-25 18:37

CAIRO: Kuwait will end the strict lockdown imposed in Farwaniya governorate from 5 a.m (0200 GMT) on Sunday, the center for government communication announced on Twitter on Saturday.

Farwaniya was the last area to be effectively isolated in a country which has reported 63,309 coronavirus cases and 429 deaths.



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Kuwait to shorten curfew, allow hotels and mosques to reopen Saudi citizens allowed to enter Kingdom by land from UAE, Bahrain and Kuwait

[Jordan arrests leaders of teacher's union](#)

Author:

Reuters

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1595695975669139500

Sat, 2020-07-25 16:40

AMMAN: Jordan's deputy attorney-general has moved to stop the work of the elected teachers' union, closed its offices, arrested its leadership team and asked the education minister to create a temporary committee in its place.

Jordan's official news agency Petra quoted Hassan Abdallat as saying that the teachers' union offices would not be allowed to operate for two years.

Abdallat also said he had ordered the Media Commission to issue a gag order to prevent news of the case being published.

The deputy attorney-general said that union leaders would be questioned over alleged crimes – including financial misconduct – that were being investigated by the anti-corruption commission, and a number of cases of incitement by the deputy head of the union via social media videos.

The teacher's union leadership has been protesting the unilateral cancelation by the government of an agreed-to pay rise that came after a long struggle.

The government said that the suspension of salary raises was temporary due to COVID-19. Education Minister Tayseer Nuaimi told Petra news that pay rises suspended for civilian and military employees would be restored on Jan. 1, 2021.

Huda Etoom, a representative of the Jordanian parliament from the Islamic Islah block and a member of the teacher's union, told Arab News that the attack was political. "This is a political case, not a legal one. The government doesn't tolerate anyone who opposes them. If the government is unhappy with the Islamic movement they should go directly after the Islamic Action Front and the Islamic movement itself, not

after teachers and their union.”

Hala Ahed, a prominent Jordanian human rights lawyer who specializes in issues concerning unions and freedom of expression, told Arab News that the government could not simply stop the teacher’s union from working. “The only parties that can stop the union are its own members or a final judicial decision. The attorney-general has no constitutional right to do that,” she said.

Ahed also said that the education minister appointing himself the temporary head of the union was illegal. “If the courts decide to dissolve the current elected leadership then a temporary committee must be formed from its own members.”

Ahmad Awad, director of the Phenix Center for Economics and Informatics, told Arab News that the decision against the union had no legal backing. “There is a gap between what the constitution and existing laws guarantee and this last decision,” he said.

Nedal Mansour, director of the Center for the Defense of the Freedom of Journalists, told Arab News that calls to stop publication of news about the case were a restriction on freedom of expression. “Such decisions must be restricted to ban the minutes of interrogations and widening the gag order or discussion about it is a violation of freedom of expression.”

Teachers throughout Jordan, including in the capital Amman, held impromptu demonstrations on Saturday protesting government decisions against their union. The teacher’s union was accredited in Jordan in 2011 after many years of struggle by public service teachers.



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UAE, Jordan royals discuss regional issues, cooperation Jordan to allow tourists from low-risk countries to visit in groups

[Iranian president urges coronavirus caution during religious festivities](#)

Author:

Reuters

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1595681218798520300

Sat, 2020-07-25 12:40

TEHRAN: Iranian President Hassan Rouhani urged people on Saturday to observe health protocols and practice social distancing during upcoming Muslim festivities, as a health official said there had been a surge in coronavirus infections in a major holy city.

Muslims around the world mark the Eid Al-Adha feast, due to start at the end of the month. This year, Saudi Arabia is to limit the number of domestic

pilgrims attending Hajj to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Most Iranians are Shi'ite Muslims, who also mark their most significant mourning ceremonies of Ashura in September.

"Let glorious festivities be held in mosques and religious centers by observing health protocols and social distancing," Rouhani said in a televised speech.

"Let masks this year be part of the glorious mourning of Muharram," Rouhani said, referring to Ashura, the 10th day of the lunar month of Muharram, when according to Islamic tradition Imam Hussein was killed in battle in 680. One of the Eid Al-Adha rituals is the sacrificial slaughter of sheep and giving to the poor. Iranian health officials have urged the faithful to package the meat before distribution.

Deputy Health Minister Iraj Harirchi, speaking on state television, urged people not to visit the northeastern holy city of Mashad, which he said has seen an increase of 300% in coronavirus cases over a one month period. Millions typically visit Mashad's Imam Reza shrine, which is Iran's largest Shi'ite religious complex.

Iran's total tally of coronavirus cases hit 288,839 on Saturday, with 15,485 deaths, Health Ministry spokeswoman Sima Sadat Lari said on television. The country gradually lifted its COVID-19 restrictions from mid-April, but they have been reimposed in most areas after a sharp spike in cases. On Saturday, officials in the capital Tehran extended restrictions by another week.



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Iranian judiciary says passengers on 'harassed' airliner can sue US in Iran courts
Iran condemns US after warplane fly-by panics Iranian airliner passengers

[Sudan finds mass grave likely linked to foiled 1990 coup](#)

Author:

Sat, 2020-07-25 01:29

CAIRO: Sudanese authorities have found a mass grave believed to contain the bodies of 28 army officers shot in a foiled coup attempt against former President Omar Bashir in 1990, the public prosecutor said.

It was the second Bashir-era mass grave uncovered in as many months.

Bashir's repressive rule collapsed last year, when the military ousted him after months of street protests.

The transitional government, jointly led by civilians and army generals, is navigating a fraught path toward democratic elections and trying to hold Bashir's government accountable for crimes committed over the 30 years that he ruled Sudan with an iron fist.

"Evidence indicates that the mass grave is most likely where the bodies of the officers lay who were killed and buried in a ruthless manner," said the public prosecutor late on Thursday. A team of 23 experts took three weeks to identify and uncover the site, which remains heavily guarded, it added.

There was no immediate comment from Bashir's defense lawyers.

The 28 officers who sought to overthrow Bashir were arrested and executed in murky circumstances in the spring of 1990. Bashir had been a little-known general when he vaulted to power in a military-backed Islamist coup the year before, toppling the democratically elected government.

HIGHLIGHTS

• It was the second Bashir-era mass grave uncovered in as many months. • The 28 officers who sought to overthrow Bashir were arrested and executed in murky circumstances in the spring of 1990.

Bashir, 76, who is already imprisoned for corruption and facing several other trials, appeared in court earlier this week over charges of plotting the bloodless 1989 coup that brought him to power. The trial is seen as a rare attempt at historical reckoning in Sudan, long convulsed by military coups,

tumultuous party politics and civil strife.

In the decades that followed, the government hosted Osama bin Laden, among other militants, rolled back personal freedoms, oversaw a bloody counterinsurgency campaign in the western Darfur region and brutally quashed protests.

The discovery of two mass graves, the one found earlier holding the bodies of student conscripts shot or beaten to death after trying to flee a military camp, were a reminder of the scale of alleged human rights violations during Bashir's rule.

"Such crimes will not pass without a fair trial," the public prosecutor said, addressing the families of victims.

Transitional authorities' attempts to dismantle Al-Bashir's legacy and call former officials to account have faced considerable headwinds, with the military retaining control over key portfolios.

The International Criminal Court (ICC) has sought to arrest Bashir on charges of war crimes and genocide linked to the Darfur conflict in the 2000s, when the government launched a scorched-earth assault of aerial bombings and unleashed militias known as the Janjaweed, who are accused of mass killings and rapes.

Sudan's transitional authorities announced earlier this year they had agreed to send Bashir to the ICC at The Hague.



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Sudan's Bashir back in court for trial over 1989 coup