



Official Statement of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA)

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We need to work together to convince President Erdogan not to convert Hagia Sophia into a mosque in Istanbul. Hagia Sophia was built as a Church and a pride of Greek Orthodox Church which commands the loyalty of Greek Orthodox Christians counting some 300 million in Greece, Turkey and around the world. Russian Orthodox Church which is a splinter of Greek Orthodox continues to jointly have a sacred sentiment for Hagia Sophia.

Sultan Mohammad AlFateh, the Ottoman King who conquered Istanbul (Constantinople), converted the Church Hagia Sophia to a Mosque. He is hailed as a Muslim hero and conqueror but the desecration of a place of worship of Christians, Jews and other faiths is strongly prohibited in Islam. The Quran 40:22 clearly states that it is against Allah's plan to demolish places of worship and convert them into something else.

Our beloved Prophet Muhammad PBUH emphasized that we have to protect the unarmed enemies, their crops and places of worship in a war. We have a long list of similar items that our first Khalifa, Abu Bakr gave to his army generals commissioned to fight the enemies in Syria and Iraq, protecting their sacred places was an important item among them.

You must be fully aware of the historical event when Umar al Khattab, the second rightly guided Khalifa of our Prophet visited Jerusalem after it was conquered by his army and the vanquished governor Sophronius took him around to show the sacred Christian monuments in the city of Jerusalem. Holy Sepulcher, the Tomb of Jesus was one of them. Umar was overwhelmed and Sophronius could very well notice that. Sophronius was aware of the Islamic belief about Christ and he asked Umar to pray according to Islamic tradition in the Holy Shrine. Umar told him that he would not pray because if he did, later generations of Muslim rulers would convert the Holy Sepulcher into a Mosque. He made it clear that as conquerors, Muslims are charged with the duty to protect the religious monuments of the defeated people with dignity.

It is clear that our Islamic texts and the practice of the Prophet and his rightly guided Califs define the role of Islam as the protector of other's holy places. While Al Fatih's conquest of Istanbul is a source of inspiration for Muslims through history and throughout the world. But the desecration of the Hagia Sophia is not one of those acts that anyone should follow.

It was during the aggressive secularization of Turkey by Mustafa Kamal Pasha, that Hagia Sophia was converted into a museum. In our times, under the leadership of President Erdogan, a populist sentimental wave has been rising to convert the Hagia Sophia into a mosque. This is

seen as an ascendency of Islam. It is unfortunate that such an act is not giving glory to Islam which strongly forbids Muslims from such a sacrilegious act.

The conversion of Hagia Sophia will reopen the wounds of the Greek Orthodox Christians, Russian Orthodox Christians, and Christian communities across sectarian bounds around the world. It brings another heinous picture to our memory in recent decades where in India a centuries old Babri Mosque was demolished by Hindu zealots thinking they were bringing glory to Hinduism and correcting a historical wrong. The perpetrators of this destruction used this wave of Hindu militancy to take over whole of India and impose a fascist interpretation of Hinduism down the throats of Muslims and the majority of Hindus who believed in pluralism and non-violence.

We appeal to our peace-loving supporters of Turkish democracy to save it from falling into the same chaos of religious intolerance as India has. President Erdogan spoke strongly against the Indian situation. He warned Prime Minister Modi against lynching Muslims and promoting violence against them in India. But his own act of conversion of Hagia Sophia will strengthen Modi in his anti-Islam policies and produce more Modis around the world. We do not want to see Turkey to follow the same path in alienating Christians and Muslims in a big way.

ISNA in last 57 years has been able to raise a Muslim community in America, building thousands of mosques and Islamic schools. Our growth, our prosperity is the success of our multi religious, pluralist nation where people of all different denominations are free to build their sacred places and worship in their own traditions and in their own languages. When the Islamophobes threatened us with violence and attacks, it was the Christian, Jews and all different denominations who established a campaign to stand up against anti Muslim sentiment. This resulted in establishing a vibrant movement called “Shoulder to Shoulder with Muslims Against Anti Muslim Sentiment, Upholding the American Values of Religious Freedom.” This campaign is organized, funded and steered by major American national religious organizations. The Greek Orthodox Church has been in the forefront.

Dr. Sayyid M. Syeed is the President of the Board of Directors of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), a national umbrella organization which has more than 300 affiliates across the United States and Canada.