

After Hagia Sophia, Turkey converts second ancient Byzantine church into mosque

by [David I. Klein](#)

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Muslims attend Friday prayers outside the newly inaugurated Kariye Mosque, formerly Chora Church, in Istanbul, Turkey on May 10. (RNS photo/David I. Klein)

Hundreds of worshippers filled the narrow streets of Istanbul's Fatih district on Friday to hear the sounds of Friday prayers ringing out from the newly inaugurated Kariye Mosque.

Once known as the Chora Church, the site spent the last 79 years as a museum. But it is now the latest structure to be converted back into a mosque by the government

of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, following the conversion of Hagia Sophia in 2020. While viewed as a triumph by many Turkish Muslims, the Greek Orthodox Church [has decried it](#) as an “ill-advised decision” that “makes a mockery of the Turkish government’s commitment to religious tolerance and religious freedom.”

Chora’s conversion was announced shortly after Hagia Sophia’s, but its opening for prayer was delayed by years of restoration work.

The showing for the first Friday prayers at Kariye was relatively quiet compared to Hagia Sophia, which drew hundreds of thousands who filled the streets with prayer rugs for blocks and blocks away from the building. By contrast, the crowd on Friday was relatively average for a mosque in one of Istanbul’s more religiously conservative neighborhoods, where Friday worshippers frequently spill out onto the streets.

Both the Chora Church and Hagia Sophia are 4th-century Byzantine constructions. They spent nearly a millennium as Christian holy sites before being converted to mosques by the Ottomans after their conquest of Constantinople in the 15th century. Despite their conversions, they remained revered by Orthodox Christians. After the founding of a secular Turkish Republic in the early 20th century, the decision was made for both to be neither mosque nor church but simply museums.

“Both Hagia Sophia and Chora embodied Byzantine and Ottoman pasts, and they became symbols of co-existence and multi-faith living practices. Their conversion fundamentally implies a hierarchy, prioritizing the Islamic past over all other layers, Greek Orthodox, Armenian, Jewish, Syriac, et al,” Özgür Kaymak, a lecturer and researcher on minority rights at Istanbul’s MEF University, said in an email.

Rededicating the sites as mosques is more than just a status change. According to Islamic tradition, artwork of human figures are forbidden in places of prayer, while in Orthodox Churches, icons of Christ, saints, and other biblical figures are a defining feature.

In Hagia Sophia, the mosaics of Jesus and Mary have been covered with curtains since the conversion. While Erdoğan promised Hagia Sophia would remain fully accessible and free to all visitors, Turkey reneged on that earlier this year, reimposing an entrance fee on tourists and relegating them to the upper level, while the main floor is exclusive to Muslim worshippers.

Observers have also [criticized](#) the Turkish Directorate of Religion's caretaking of the site, noting damage that did not exist when it was under the purview of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism.

Though Chora is significantly smaller than Hagia Sophia, it is home to some of the best-preserved examples of late-Byzantine art, including mosaics, icons, and frescoes, and is considered a UNESCO World Heritage site.

"For us it's a very important place because it remembers our culture and our traditions here," Evangelos Markantonis, an Orthodox priest who was leading a group of theology students to Chora on Friday, said. "Though we cannot venerate as Orthodox Christians, we have to try to find things we can be united on. Only with dialogue and good deeds can we continue our lives."

Erdoğan had long refused calls from his right to convert churches like Hagia Sophia and Chora, telling supporters in 2019 to fill the nearby Sultan Ahmet Mosque (also known in English as the Blue Mosque) before they talked about needing to pray in Hagia Sophia.

Nonetheless, he made an about-turn in 2020.

"My dear nation, the conquest of Istanbul and the conversion of the Hagia Sophia into a mosque are among the most glorious chapters in Turkish history," Erdoğan said in [a speech inaugurating the Hagia Sophia as a mosque](#). "This is the most honorable day that Islam has been looking forward to, Greek Constantinople has become Turkish Istanbul," he added, quoting the Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet.

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Chora's opening as the Kariye Mosque comes just weeks after Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) suffered its largest electoral defeat in two decades during Turkey's nationwide municipal elections.

"The recent conversion of Chora into a mosque may be due to Erdoğan's many problems, including his geopolitical power politics, his appeal to religio-nationalism to revive his electoral popularity after the March elections or his tactic to divert attention from Turkey's economic downturn," Kaymak said.

Many analysts have attributed the loss to AKP bleeding votes to the more Islamist-leaning New Welfare Party, which has pressured Erdogan over his response to the

Israel-Hamas war and humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip.

Muslim worshippers at the mosque on Friday said they viewed its rededication as an Islamic site to be a national win for Turkey.

“This mosque is one of the symbols of the Conquest. We are proud and happy. There are very beautiful frescoes inside. They were also nicely renovated before they were closed. May it be good for our country and our nation,” a bystander, Ahmet Öteyüzoğlu, told Turkish media.

“Thank God for these days. Not everyone has the opportunity in their lifetime,” another bystander named Mehmet Çelik told the Turkish news service Anadolu Agency, in reference to having been able to pray at both the rededicated Hagia Sophia and Kariye Mosques.

However, Greece, the US State Department, and Orthodox Christian institutions worldwide have all criticized the decision to revert the structure into a mosque.

“I want to publicly express my intense dissatisfaction, interpreting the feelings of all Greek women and men, for the completely unnecessary conversion of a historic Byzantine temple, the Monastery of Chora, into a mosque. It is, I believe, an action that offends the rich history of Istanbul itself as a crossroads of cultures,” Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis [said shortly before leaving for Turkey](#) for a planned meeting with Erdogan.

“We encourage the Turkish government to preserve and ensure access to sites and buildings that have hosted different religious communities in a way that respects their diverse histories,” a [State Department spokesperson said](#) in response to questions from Greek media.

“The Turkish government’s appropriation of both as the property of one faith group not only constitutes yet another sign of that government’s contempt for Turkey’s rich Orthodox Christian heritage but further imperils the religious freedom of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the remaining Christians of that land,” the Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate said in [a statement](#). —Religion News Service