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Hagia Sophia Museum: Turkey

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Why in News

Recently, the government of **Turkey** has decided to convert Istanbul's iconic **Hagia Sophia Museum** into a mosque.



Key Points

- **Turkey's Stand:**
 - **Superiority of the Islamic World:** For the President **Recep Tayyip Erdoğan** of Justice and Development Party (AKP), and his supporters who tend to have **nationalist-Islamist sympathies**, it symbolises the conquest of **Christian Constantinople by the Ottomans**, and the **superiority of the Islamic world**.
 - **Political Symbol:** Hagia Sophia is not only the symbol of Turkey's most popular tourist attraction but also acts as a **political symbol**.
The plan of conversion is also an attempt to **gain political support** as AKP has lost many municipal elections.
 - **USA Recognition of Jerusalem:** It also coincided with USA recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.
Jerusalem which has a significant population of Arab-muslims who are becoming more and more hostile because of the **USA's recent stand on Israel-Palestine issue**. This step of conversion of mosque would gain support of Arab countries for Turkey.
 - **Less Opposition:** It has also been believed that the government does not need the courts to decide on the fate of the Hagia Sophia as legal rulings will add legitimacy to his proposals.
Also, there has been less opposition within Turkey because religious minorities do not wish to be involved in such polarising subjects
 - **Domestic Matter:** Turkey considers the status of the Hagia Sophia as a domestic matter and interference of international players is not required as **Greece objected to the conversion** of the museum into a mosque.
- **Greece's Stand:**

Diplomatic Tension: There have been diplomatic tensions between Turkey and Greece over many issues related to Hagia Sophia.

 - According to Greece, the museum which has been designated a world cultural heritage is currently being used to promote other purposes.
 - Earlier, Greece objected to the reading of passages from the Quran inside the Hagia Sophia on the 567th anniversary of the Ottoman invasion of the former Byzantine capital.
- **Role of UNESCO:** Greece had appealed to the **United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)**, objecting to Turkey's moves on grounds that the conversion is a violation of UNESCO's 'Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage'.
UNESCO too has objected to Turkey's plans.
- **USA's Stand:** It has expressed that by the conversion the Hagia Sophia would not be able to serve humanity as a bridge between those of differing faith and cultures.

Background

- **Hagia Sophia** is the former **Greek Orthodox Christian patriarchal cathedral**, later an Ottoman imperial mosque and now a museum located in Istanbul, Turkey.
- Built in AD 537 (**Byzantine architecture**), during the reign of **Justinian 1, the Eastern Roman emperor**, it is famous for its large dome.
- In 1453, when Constantinople (capital city of the Roman Empire) fell to Sultan Mehmet II's Ottoman forces, the Hagia Sophia was turned into a mosque.
- For a long time, the Hagia Sophia was Istanbul's most important mosque.
- In 1934, **Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founder of the Republic of Turkey**, converted the **mosque into a museum** in an attempt to make the **country more secular**.
- The 1,500-year-old structure has been listed as a **UNESCO'S World Heritage site**.

A World Heritage Site is a place that is listed by UNESCO as of special cultural or physical significance.

Source: IE