

## HAGIA SOPHIA

## 5 THINGS TO KNOW

A top Turkish court has ruled that the Byzantine-era Hagia Sophia, which has served as a museum in Istanbul since 1935, would be handed over to Turkey's religious affairs directorate and reopened for Muslim worship. Here are five things to know about the Hagia Sophia:

## WHAT IS THE HAGIA SOPHIA?

The edifice was first built as an Orthodox Christian church between 532 and 537 AD under emperor Justinian I and is considered the most important Byzantine structure. After the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople (now Istanbul) in 1453, it was converted into a mosque before being opened as a museum in 1935 after the secular modern Turkish republic was established in 1923. It was added to the list of UNESCO world heritage sites in 1985.

## WHAT IS ITS OFFICIAL STATUS NOW?

Following Friday's decision, it reverts from being a museum to being a mosque. The Council of State, Turkey's highest administrative court, unanimously cancelled a 1934 cabinet decision and said Hagia Sophia was registered as a mosque in its property deeds. Until now it has been the principal tourist attraction in Turkey, hosting millions of tourists every year -- 3.8 million visitors in 2019.

## WHAT WOULD IT CHANGE FOR VISITORS?

Tourists could still visit the Hagia Sophia, just as they are able to see the Blue Mosque nearby. But the example of the Hagia Sophia of Trabzon in northern Turkey, opened to Muslim worship in 2013, may give pause for thought.

## WHY DID THIS BECOME AN ISSUE NOW?



There was a long legal process leading up to Friday's ruling. The Constitutional Court in September 2018 turned down a plea by an independent heritage association to open the building up for Muslim worshipping. The main opposition secular Republican People's Party (CHP) has accused the government of using the issue to distract voters from economic woes and other issues following the coronavirus pandemic. "Erdogan appears to be responding to a drop in voter support, which is likely a fallout from Turkey's COVID-19-induced economic downturn," said Erdemir. As early as 1994 when he was running for mayor of Istanbul, Erdogan promised to open the building to Muslim worshippers.

## WHAT IS THE INT'L COMMUNITY'S POSITION?

The landmark ruling has already inflamed tensions not just with the West and Turkey's historic foe Greece, but also Russia, with which Erdogan has forged an increasingly close partnership in recent years. Greece branded the move an "open provocation to the civilised world", while the Russian Orthodox Church said Turkey had ignored "millions of Christians" with its move.

SOURCE: AFP



Animal rights and environmental activists hold signs as they stand inside a fountain after members of the Animal Rebellion group poured red dye into the water, on Trafalgar Square in London, Britain, on Saturday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## HAGIA SOPHIA DECISION

## Erdogan rejects global criticism

AGENCIES

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has rejected international condemnation over the decision to change the status of Istanbul's landmark Hagia Sophia from a museum to a mosque, saying it represented his country's will to use its "sovereign rights".

In the past, he has repeatedly called for the stunning building to be renamed as a mosque and in 2018, he recited a verse from the Quran at Hagia Sophia.

"Those who do not take a step against Islamophobia in their own countries ... attack Turkey's will to use its sovereign rights," Erdogan said at a ceremony he attended via video-conference on Saturday. The colossal Hagia Sophia was built 1,500 years ago as an Orthodox Christian cathedral and was converted into a mosque after the Ottomans conquered Constantinople, now Istanbul, in 1453. The secular Turkish government decided in 1934 to make it a museum.

Erdogan on Friday formally converted the building back into a mosque and declared it open for Muslim worship,

hours after a high court annulled the 1934 decision turning it into a museum. He said Muslim prayers would begin at the UNESCO World Heritage Site on July 24.

The president went ahead with the plan despite appeals from Nato ally the United States and from Russia, with which Ankara has forged close relations in recent years.

Greece swiftly condemned the move as a provocation, France deplored it while the US also expressed disappointment.

Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko on Saturday said Moscow regretted the decision.

"The cathedral is on Turkey's territory, but it is without question everybody's heritage," he told the Interfax news agency. Pope Francis yesterday said he was "very distressed" over Turkey's decision to convert the Byzantine-era monument Hagia Sophia back into a mosque.

"My thoughts go to Istanbul. I'm thinking about Hagia Sophia. I am very distressed," the pope said in the Vatican's first reaction to a decision that has drawn international criticism.

The World Council of Churches wrote

to Erdogan expressing "grief and dismay" over the move and urged him to reverse his decision.

But Ozgur Unluhisarcikli, Ankara director of the German Marshall Fund, told AFP the move would win hearts and minds at home as most Turks "would favour such a decision for religious or nationalist sentiments."

"This is a debate president Erdogan cannot lose and the opposition cannot win. As a matter of fact, this issue also has the potential to disunite the opposition parties."

On Saturday, police had put up barriers around Hagia Sophia.

On Friday, Erdogan gave assurances that Hagia Sophia would be open to all visitors, including non-Muslims.

"The Hagia Sophia's doors will remain open to visitors from all around the world," his press aide Fahrettin Altun tweeted on Saturday.

"People of all religious denominations are welcome and encouraged to visit it - just as they have been able to visit other mosques, including the Blue Mosque."

DEATH BY DRONE  
Can states justify targeted killings?

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

In a move that caused a ripple effect across the Middle East, Iranian General Qassem Soleimani was killed in a US drone strike near Baghdad's international airport on January 3. On that day, the Pentagon announced the attack was carried out "at the direction of the president".

Iran retaliated with a ballistic missile attack targeting American troops in Iraq on January 7.

In a new report examining the legality of armed drones and the Soleimani killing in particular, Agnes Callamard, UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial and arbitrary killings, said the US raid that killed Soleimani was "unlawful".

Callamard presented her report at the Human Rights Council in Geneva on Thursday. The United States, which is not a member after quitting the council in 2018, rejected the report saying it gave "a pass to terrorists".

In Callamard's view, the consequences of targeted killings by armed drones have been neglected by states. Her report said the world is at a "critical time and a possible tipping point" when it comes to the use of unmanned aerial vehicles.

A "second drone age" has now emerged, she wrote, with states employing ever more advanced technology.

One of the greatest concerns with the increased use of armed drones noted in the report is the number of civilian casualties it causes. The attack on Soleimani, for example, resulted in far more casualties than the direct targets.

Soleimani was killed along with eight others including Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the deputy head of Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Forces.

Previous UN special rapporteurs on extrajudicial killings



have lamented the lack of clarity among states about their obligations regarding drone warfare and the absence of accountability.

Experts agree drones are not necessarily illegal, but it remains unclear under which circumstances their use violates international law.

Under Article 51 of the UN Charter, the use of deadly force is allowed in two scenarios: When it is authorised by the UN Security Council (UNSC) and when a country acts in self-defence.

Callamard has emphasised the test for "anticipatory self-defence" is very narrow: It must be a necessity that is "instant, overwhelming, and leaving no choice of means and no moment of deliberation". This standard, she stated in a tweet issued right after Soleimani's killing, "is unlikely to be met".

Callamard's report calls for greater accountability for targeted killings, as well as greater regulation of the weapons used.

The report recommends UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres set up an international fact-finding mission to investigate targeted killings by drones.

Callamard also called on states to robustly investigate allegations of harm to civilians during such attacks and to release their findings.



This file photo shows a US Air Force pilot takes off in his Air Force F-35A aircraft from Hill Air Force Base, Utah. The US State Department said on Thursday it had approved the possible sale of 105 Lockheed Martin F-35 fighter jets to Japan at an estimated cost of \$23 billion.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## The Asia-Pacific arms race has taken an ominous turn

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

Within days of each other, two key United States allies - Australia and Japan - announced their intentions to boost defence spending and adopt a more aggressive military posture. Rising tensions in the Asia-Pacific region account for what is being called a "game-changer" in the way the two countries think about protecting themselves from China's rapid military expansion.

Australia's announcement in late June that it would boost defence spending over the next decade by 40 percent caught most observers by surprise. Australia is a key partner in the region for the US and cooperation between the two countries remains central to Australia's new strategic thinking.

But, an increasingly erratic foreign policy under the Trump administration has made its allies nervous about the US's long-term commitments in the region. China's increased assertiveness in the South China Sea, near Taiwan and on the border with India has made many analysts concerned that China is lowering the threshold for military action, making war more likely.

With this in mind, Australia has been steadily modernising its military, ordering advanced, super-quiet French submarines, received its first batch of American stealth jets and boosted its advanced naval vessels.

In February, the US agreed to the sale of advanced, stealthy long-range anti-ship missiles, able to strike high-value targets and sink them at a range of 370km, triple the range of Australia's current Harpoon

missile. Hypersonic missile technology is also being researched, with weapons able to attack their targets with very little warning time due to the extreme speeds at which the missiles travel.

It is not the only country that wants this flexibility. Japan has always relied on its ally the US to protect it from potential aggressors while maintaining its post-World War II pacifist constitution. This trust has slowly been eroded and Japan now looks to develop its own first-strike capability, a game-changer for the country's military posture.

In an increasingly volatile region, Japan's military budget is set to rise for the eighth straight year to \$48bn as it steadily seeks to rearm itself, revamping its air force, buying in US stealthy F35s and early-warning aircraft. Concerned not just by China's rise but by a North Korea that has threatened to start testing its long-range missiles again, Japan now wants to give itself the option to hit targets hundreds of kilometres away should it need to.

Moreover, China's rapid buildup of bases, naval forces and long-range air force in the South China Sea and beyond has unnerved its neighbours, who now seek closer defence ties with each other. Australia and India signed a naval and logistical cooperation defence pact in June.

Japan seeks to strengthen ties with India, Australia and other Asean states and is pushing plans for further cooperation in an effort to form an alliance that is able, with the US help, to counter any potential aggression from China.



## TB vaccine may limit Covid deaths

REUTERS

A tuberculosis vaccine routinely given to children in countries with high rates of that bacterial disease might be helping to reduce deaths from COVID-19, researchers reported in the scientific journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

The researchers found that countries with higher rates of Bacille Calmette-Guérin (BCG) vaccinations for tuberculosis had lower mortality rates. A good example was Germany, which had different vaccine plans before East Germany and West Germany were unified. COVID-19 mortality rates among senior citizens are nearly three times higher in western Germany than in eastern Germany, where more older people received the vaccine as infants, they found.

## NEW US VISA POLICY FOR FOREIGN STUDENTS

## 180 colleges, univs join lawsuit opposing move

UNB

A total of 180 educational institutions in the United States joined a lawsuit opposing the new visa policy for international students by the Trump administration, according to a report from Xinhua.

An amicus brief document was filed with the Massachusetts federal district court and released to the public on Friday in this regard.

The US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) announced a new visa policy for international students and this move prompted Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) to launch a legal action against it.

The 22-page document issued by the Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration representing 180 higher education institutions showed a nationwide support for rescinding the guidance, the report said.

"ICE's new policy serves only to severely disrupt international students' educational attainment, and our country is worse off for it," said Miriam Feldblum, executive director of the Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration in a statement posted on the group's official website. "This quasi-international student ban represents another unfortunate assault by the administration against immigrants and higher education," she added.

The ICE announced on Monday that students currently in the United States on F-1 and M-1 visas must depart the country or take other measures, such as transferring to a school with in-person instruction to remain in lawful status, if their schools' classes are entirely online in the fall semester.

The measure also stipulated that those in violation would risk "immigration consequences, including, but not limited to, the initiation of removal proceedings."

## Lives will be lost

## Aid agencies warn as UN buckles under Russia, China pressure to cut aid access to Syria

AGENCIES

A UN Security Council resolution that leaves only one of two border crossings open for aid deliveries from Turkey into rebel-held northwestern Syria will cost lives and intensify the suffering of 1.3 million people living there, aid agencies said.

Western states had pressed for aid access to continue through two crossings at the Turkish border, but Russia, President Bashar al-Assad's main ally in his war against, and China vetoed a last-ditch effort on Friday to keep both open.

The UNSC on Saturday approved aid deliveries to Syria through one border crossing from Turkey, a day after its authorization for the six-year-long humanitarian operation ended, leaving millions of Syrian civilians in limbo.

"In northwest Syria, where a vital cross-border lifeline has been closed ... it will be harder to reach an estimated 1.3 million people dependent on food and medicine delivered by the UN cross-border," aid agencies operating in Syria said in a joint statement.

"Many will now not receive the help they need. Lives will be lost. Suffering will intensify."

"With the first case of COVID-19 confirmed in Idlib, an area with a severely weakened health infrastructure, this is a devastating blow," the



statement added.

In a separate statement, Physicians for Human Rights said the resolution had shut down "direct routes to hundreds of thousands of displaced Syrians in dire need of food and medicine".

Russia and China have argued that the northwest can be reached from within Syria, meaning via government-held territory, and that aid deliveries from Turkey violate Syria's sovereignty. "This issue should not be politicized," deputy Russian UN envoy Dmitry Polyanskiy said after the vote.

Louis Charbonneau, UN director at Human Rights Watch, said: "Council members buckled and gave Moscow what it wanted - a further drastic reduction of cross-border aid to desperate Syrians who rely on it for survival."



## Iran says misaligned radar led to Ukrainian jet downing

Iran said that the misalignment of an air defence unit's radar system was the key "human error" that led to the accidental downing of a Ukrainian passenger plane in January. "A failure occurred due to a human error in following the procedure" for aligning the radar, causing a "107-degree error" in the system, the Iranian Civil Aviation Organisation (CAO) said in a report late Saturday. This error "initiated a hazard chain" that saw further errors committed in the minutes before the plane was shot down, said the CAO document, presented as a "factual report" and not as the final report on the accident investigation. Flight 752, a Ukraine International Airlines jetliner, was struck by two missiles and crashed shortly after taking off from Tehran's main airport on January 8, killing all 176 people on board.

## Polarised Poles vote

Poles yesterday voted in a knife-edge presidential run-off between a populist incumbent closely allied with US President Donald Trump and a europhile liberal keen to mend fences with Brussels. The stakes are high for Poland's right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party government, which has relied on incumbent President Andrzej Duda to push through judicial reforms that have set Warsaw on a collision course with the EU over democratic standards just three decades after communism's demise. Duda is locked in a tight race with Warsaw mayor Rafal Trzaskowski of the opposition Civic Platform (PO) and final opinion polls showed an almost even split between the two.

## China raises flood alert to second highest level

China yesterday raised its flood response alert to the second highest grade as downpours continued to batter regions along the Yangtze River, with the eastern provinces of Jiangsu and Jiangxi among the worst hit, state media reported. Regional flooding in the Poyang county of Jiangxi has made water levels of China's Lake Poyang, its biggest freshwater lake, surge to above 22.52 meters, a historical high and well above the alert level of 19.50 metres. By Saturday evening, provincial military authorities had dispatched thousands of soldiers to help bolster nearly 9 km (6 miles) of the lake's banks to prevent them from bursting, state television said. According to data from the Ministry of Water Resources, 212 rivers have since early July exceeded alerting levels including 19 of them rising to historical highs.

SOURCE: REUTERS, AFP