



National Federation of Cypriots in the UK

Εθνική Κυπριακή Ομοσπονδία Ηνωμένου Βασιλείου

Working for a Free, United Cyprus

The Rt. Hon. Dominic Raab MP
Foreign and Commonwealth Office
King Charles Street
Whitehall
Westminster
London
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15 July 2020

Dear Foreign Secretary,

I am writing to you on behalf of the National Federation of Cypriots in the UK, the acknowledged voice and representative body of the 300,000 Britons of Cypriot origin.

Over the last few months, the UK has shown incredible resolve and admirable collective spirit to get through the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout this period, Britain has also taken steps to demonstrate her ambition towards playing a positive and constructive role in the world, outside of the European Union. In stark contrast, the Republic of Turkey has used this same period to foster division and destabilise the Eastern Mediterranean region.

The recent decision of the Turkish Government to convert Hagia Sophia from a museum into a mosque is divisive, tragic and wrong. Hagia Sophia is one of the most pre-eminent, historic, churches of Christian Orthodoxy and continues to have significant cultural and religious significance for many Orthodox Christians. The news of this decision has devastated millions around the world, not just Orthodox Christians, and has been met with widespread condemnation. Hagia Sophia is a sacred part of our planet's cultural heritage and it is one of the most iconic buildings in all human civilisation; a fact that is recognised by its status as an UNESCO World Heritage Site. The Pope, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, the Presidents of Churches Together in England, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, UNESCO, and numerous civil society leaders in Turkey have all criticised this decision by the Turkish authorities. The first Turkish Nobel laureate, Mr Orhan Pamuk, has said, "There are millions of secular Turks like me who are crying against this but their voices are not heard." The conversion of Hagia Sophia from a museum into a mosque is an open challenge to UNESCO and world civilisation that recognises the unique value and universality of that monument.

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A complete list of member organisations and the names of all of the current officers and members of the Secretariat of the Federation can be found on the Federation's website.

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President Erdogan's latest jingoism and populism is an affront to all those who believe in peaceful coexistence in Turkey and the wider region. Whether in Turkey, in Cyprus, or across the Middle East, Turkey has consistently undermined the peaceful coexistence of people of differing faiths and backgrounds. As a museum, Hagia Sophia was a monument to all mankind, regardless of religious belief, and a powerful symbol of peaceful coexistence. This latest move is yet another milestone in Turkey's regression into an authoritarian and intolerant state.

Her Majesty's Government has been at the forefront of speaking up for the rights of Christian minorities and communities around the world. Indeed, the FCO-initiated report into Christian persecution by the Bishop of Truro in 2018 represented a significant moment in the recognition of the ongoing persecution of Christians around the world today. Turkey's decision to convert one of the most sacred Christian sites in the world into a mosque is a historically significant setback to the rights of Christians in the Middle East. It is deeply concerning to see this happening in the 21st century and the international community must stand up for the rights of all persecuted religious groups.

I urge HM Government to take a strong and principled stand against the decision to convert Hagia Sophia from a museum into a mosque. Foreign Secretary, you recently said that the UK "won't look the other way" on human rights abuses and HM Government should not be idle by whilst Turkey shifts towards intolerance and increases its repression of Christian minorities. The UK can make a clear statement about its values by taking a firm and unambiguous public stance against this recent decision by Turkey.

Yours sincerely,

Christos Karaolis

President, National Federation of Cypriots in the UK

Cc: Rt. Hon. Sir Roger Gale MP