

Istanbul's Hagia Sophia is a mosque again. Do Turkish citizens want Erdogan to restore the caliphate?

Even if Erdogan wanted to restore the ancient caliphate, he would need public support to succeed.

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This month, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan reconsecrated the Hagia Sophia — a UNESCO world heritage site and museum — as a house of Muslim worship. To Erdogan's many opponents, this looks like the latest move in a long-running attempt to undo Turkish secularism. The president's supporters dismiss this interpretation, portraying the whole thing as a purely domestic, even mundane, legal matter. But Erdogan himself has hinted at something much more expansive. In a recent speech, he declared that the "resurrection of Hagia Sophia" represents "the footsteps of the will of Muslims across the world to come out of the interregnum," and the "reignition of the fire of hope of not just Muslims, but ... of all the oppressed, wronged, downtrodden and exploited." Such language has prompted critics at home and abroad to fret, "Is the caliphate next?"

The caliphate is a now-defunct office, best described as the titular head of the worldwide Muslim community. For 400 years, from 1517 to 1924, the caliph sat in Istanbul, before the position was abolished by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey. That the Hagia Sophia affair would raise the specter of the caliphate's return is not surprising: The site is rich with religious symbolism. Built by the Byzantine emperor in the 6th century, the Hagia Sophia served as one of Christendom's grandest cathedrals for almost a millennium, until it was transformed into a mosque by the conquering Ottomans. When Atatürk seized power from the caliphate after World War I and began Westernizing the country, he converted the building into a secular museum and, as one biographer wrote, a symbol of "cultural affinity between Europe and Turkey." No wonder many see Erdogan's decision as a step toward reversing Atatürk's legacy.

But do enough Turks want that to make such a direction politically feasible? We conducted a unique survey to find out.

What do Turks think?

We fielded a nationally representative, face-to-face survey of 2,500 Turkish adults through the local survey firm Sam Arastirma from March 16-26, 2019. Respondents were selected according to a multistage random sampling design intended to ensure proportional coverage across Turkey's 12 geographic regions.

Turkey?” Close to 59 percent of respondents said it was a “good decision”; 10 percent chose “I am in between/neither good nor bad”; and 14 percent said it was a “bad decision.” All percentages are weighted to adjust for the survey design.

Among the 1,000 respondents who reported voting for Erdogan’s conservative party, AKP, in the 2018 legislative election, a plurality still chose the “secular” position. Close to 43 percent of self-reported AKP voters believed abolishing the caliphate was a good decision, 15 percent were neutral, and 21 percent said it was a bad decision. In other words, few of Erdogan’s supporters want to restore a caliphate.

Perhaps Turks believe that the 1924 decision to abolish the caliphate was a good one for that era, but it’s time to bring it back. To explore this hypothesis, we asked respondents a second question: to what extent did they agree that “Muslims around the world should strive to reestablish the caliphate.” Once again, the nays have it, as you can see in the figure below. Approximately 43 percent of Turks said they “definitely disagree,” 18 percent said they “somewhat disagree,” 9 percent said they “somewhat agree,” and 8 percent said they “definitely agree.”

Even among AKP supporters, 25 percent said they “definitely disagree,” 20 percent said they “somewhat disagree,” 15 percent said they “somewhat agree,” and only 13 percent said they “definitely agree.”

Thus, if Erdogan seeks to bring back the caliphate, he’ll have to overcome not just the opposition at large, but also a big chunk of his own supporters.

What about people who didn’t respond?

Both of these questions garnered lots of non-responses: 17 percent said they “don’t know” when asked about the 1924 dissolution of the caliphate, and 21 percent said they don’t know (or refused to answer) when asked whether it should be restored today. That’s much higher than non-response rates for other questions we asked, which ranged between 2 and 5 percent.

Did those non-responses mask opinions respondents were afraid to share? To figure out whether the “don’t knows” are shadow supporters or opponents of the caliphate, we looked at their average level of religiosity. We assume that more religious Muslims would be more likely than average to support the caliphate, and less religious ones more likely to oppose it — and checked whether “don’t knows” were more common among one or the other.

We find that, among respondents who say they have no religious belief, 95.4 percent supported the 1924 abolition of the caliphate, with only 1.7 percent saying they don’t know. On the other hand, respondents who report fulfilling all Muslim religious requirements, only 36 percent said they supported the abolition of the caliphate, and 19.3 percent said they don’t know. Thus, it’s reasonable to infer from the high rates of non-response that more Turks want the caliphate than were willing to say, even though they remain a minority.

Of course, regardless of how many Turks might want to reclaim the caliphate, it’s unlikely Muslims around the world would agree. Erdogan’s rededication of the Hagia Sophia to Islamic worship and his other gestures to global Muslim leadership are therefore best understood as being mainly for domestic consumption. Our data suggest that most Turks

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