THE OPENING OF HAGIA SOPHIA FOR WORSHIP: REACTIONS FROM THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCES AND THE ARMENIAN CATHOLICOSATE OF CILICIA (ANTELIAS)

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The decision to open Hagia Sophia for worship as a mosque has elicited various reactions from around the world. The ones we would like to draw your attention are the statements of the World Council of Churches and the spiritual leader of the Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia (located in Antelias/Lebanon), Aram I.

The World Council of Churches (WCC) is an international organization consisting of various Christian churches and church associations from around the world. The WCC introduces itself as a venue for the promotion of solidarity and cooperation among Christian groups. [1] In terms of its field of work, WCC is the largest Christian organization in the world.

WCC Secretary-General Ioan Sauca has stated in his letter addressed to President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan that Hagia Sophia has been a powerful expression of the Republic of Turkeys commitment to secularism and inclusion and of its desire to leave behind the conflicts of the past. Sauca has argued, however, that the decision to open Hagia Sophia for worship as a mosque is a sign of exclusion and division.[2] Regarding the re-opening of such an emblematic place as Hagia Sophia for worship as a mosque, Sauca has claimed that it will inevitably create uncertainties, suspicions and mistrust, undermining all our efforts to bring people of different faiths together at the table of dialogue and cooperation.[3]

Despite Sauca's hope for dialogue as indicated in his statement, in a report we had previously published, we had discussed that WCC has been instrumentalized in propaganda activities related to Armenian genocide allegations and that the organization has been carrying out various activities since 1983 for the recognition and promotion of the alleged genocide. We had pointed out that the biased approach towards Turkey in the reports published and the activities in this regard carried out by WCC, which called on the United Nations in 1983 to recognize the alleged genocide, have been shaped by religious identity.[4] In this context, after the Armenian Catholicos of Etchmiadzin Karekin II,[5] who is known for his hostility towards Turkey, was elected as one of the 8 presidents of WCC; it was seen that the WCC organized activities such as its decision to take part in the 100th anniversary of the so-called Armenian genocide and to organize activities such as the arrangement of an ecumenical prayer ritual to commemorate the victims of alleged genocide.

Regarding the Hagia Sophia decision, the Armenian Catholicos of Cilicia (Antelias) Aram I, who is known for being even more hostile towards Turkey than Karekin II, made statements on this issue about two weeks ago. In his statement addressed to political and religious leaders, Aram I claimed that soon after the alleged genocide, Turkey confiscated thousands of Armenian Churches and turned them into bars, coffee shops and public parks, and that the genocide continues by the same genocidal authorities in the full view of the world.[6]

It can be gathered that the prejudice-fueled activities of the WCC stem from the unquestioned acceptance of the genocide thesis about the 1915 Events simply because the Armenians are Christians. Similarly, the statements of Aram I, who is even more hostile towards Turkey than Karekin II, should be evaluated as part of the propaganda that has been carried out for years for the genocide thesis. The behavior of these actors reveals that the genocide thesis is based on religious factors rather than historical and legal arguments.

It should be added that not all Christians have similar biased attitudes regarding the decision to open Hagia Sophia for worship. For example, Felix Körner, one of Germany's well-known Jesuit priests, made statements in this regard that ☀ What could make you sad when you think that a museum that was no longer being used as a temple has again become a place of worship now? This would not distress someone who is religious, it can only make you happy. [7]

**Picture: logo of the World Council of Churches (left), Armenian Catholicos of Cilicia Aram I (right)*

[1] Mehmet Oğuzhan Tulun, What is the World Council of Churches?, *Avrasya İncelemeleri Merkezi (AVİM),* Rapor No: 5, March 5, 2014, https://www.avim.org.tr/images/uploads/Rapor/RAPOR-5.pdf

[2] WCC letter to President Erdogan to keep Hagia Sophia as the shared heritage of humanity, *World Council of Churches*, July 11, 2020, https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/wcc-letter-to-president-erdogan-to-keep-hagia-sophia-as-the-shared-heritage-of-humanity

[3] WCC letter to President Erdogan to keep Hagia Sophia as the shared heritage of humanity.

[4] Tulun, What is the World Council of Churches?

[5] The spiritual leader (Catholicos) of the Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia, one of the

four administrative centers of the Armenian Apostolic Church, is considered to be the most senior amongst the spiritual leaders of the four centers. In this framework, the Armenian Catholicos of Cilicia is viewed as the spiritual leader of all Orthodox Armenians.

[6] Siranush Ghazanchyan, His Holiness Aram I reminds about confiscation of Armenian Churches by Turkey after the genocide, *Public Radio of Armenia*, July 12, 2020, https://en.armradio.am/2020/07/12/his-holiness-aram-i-reminds-about-confiscation-of-armenian-churches-by-turkey-after-the-genocide/

[7] Alman papazdan Ayasofya tartışmalarına iki yüzlülük eleştirisi, *NTV*, July 19, 2020, https://www.ntv.com.tr/dunya/alman-papazdan-ayasofya-tartismalarina-iki-yuzluluk-elestirisi,ugoHvvDg-0G_4wuZgO0MsQ

About the Author :

To cite this article: AVİM, . 2026. "THE OPENING OF HAGIA SOPHIA FOR WORSHIP: REACTIONS FROM THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCES AND THE ARMENIAN CATHOLICOSATE OF CILICIA (ANTELIAS)." Center For Eurasian Studies (AVİM), Commentary No.2020 / 23. July 24. Accessed November 17, 2026. https://avimbulten.org/en/Yorum/THE-OPENING-OF-HAGIA-SOPHIA-FOR-WORSHIP-REACTIONS-FROM-THE-WORLD-COUNCIL-OF-CHURCES-AND-THE-ARMENIAN-CATHOLICOSATE-OF-CILICIA-ANTELIAS

Süleyman Nazif Sok. No: 12/B Daire 3-4 06550 Çankaya-ANKARA / TÜRKİYE
Tel: +90 (312) 438 50 23-24 • **Fax**: +90 (312) 438 50 26
@avimorgtr
https://www.facebook.com/avrasyaincelemelerimerkezi
E-Mail: info@avim.org.tr
http://avim.org.tr

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