# Hagia Sophia Controversy

## Why in news?

Turkey's highest court convened to decide on turning Istanbul's Hagia Sophia museum into a mosque

## What is the Hagia Sophia?

- Hagia Sophia is listed as a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) World Heritage Site.
- It is a 1,500-year-old iconic structure built in 532 AD.
- It was originally a Greek Orthodox Christian patriarchal cathedral.
- In 1453, it was turned into an Ottoman imperial mosque.
- In 1934, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founder of the Republic of Turkey, turned it into a museum, to make the country more secular.
- There have been calls for long from Islamist groups and nationalists in the country to convert the Hagia Sophia back into a mosque.
- In 2019, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had said it he would turn the structure back into a mosque again.

## What is the controversy about?

- When Erdogan entered politics three decades ago in Turkey, he objected to the calls to convert Hagia Sophia into a mosque.
- But his rhetoric changed in 2019 during municipal elections in Istanbul that he ended up losing.
- Erdogan's plans for the conversion of the Hagia Sophia are closely connected with his attempts to score political points.

## Why is Greece objecting to this conversion?

- The controversy about the Hagia Sophia comes at a time when there are diplomatic tensions between Turkey and Greece over other issues.
- In May 2020, Greece objected to the reading of passages from the Quran inside the Hagia Sophia.
- Greece's Foreign Ministry had issued a statement saying this move was a violation of UNESCO's 'Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage'.
- Greece had said the Hagia Sophia had been designated a museum of world

cultural heritage.

## What is Turkey's response?

- Turkey responded by saying that Greece's objections to the reading of passages from the Quran were indicative of its intolerant psychology.
- Some within Turkey's political circles view the issue of Hagia Sophia as a domestic matter.
- So, they do not seem to welcome the interference of international players.

## What is next?

- Erdogan does not need the courts to decide on the fate of the Hagia.
- The courts believe that legal rulings will add legitimacy to his proposals.
- There has been opposition to these plans within Turkey, as the religious minorities do not wish to be involved in such a polarising subject.
- Greece had appealed to UNESCO, objecting to Turkey's moves on grounds that the conversion would violate international conventions.
- The UNESCO too has denounced Turkey's plans.

**Source: The Indian Express**

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