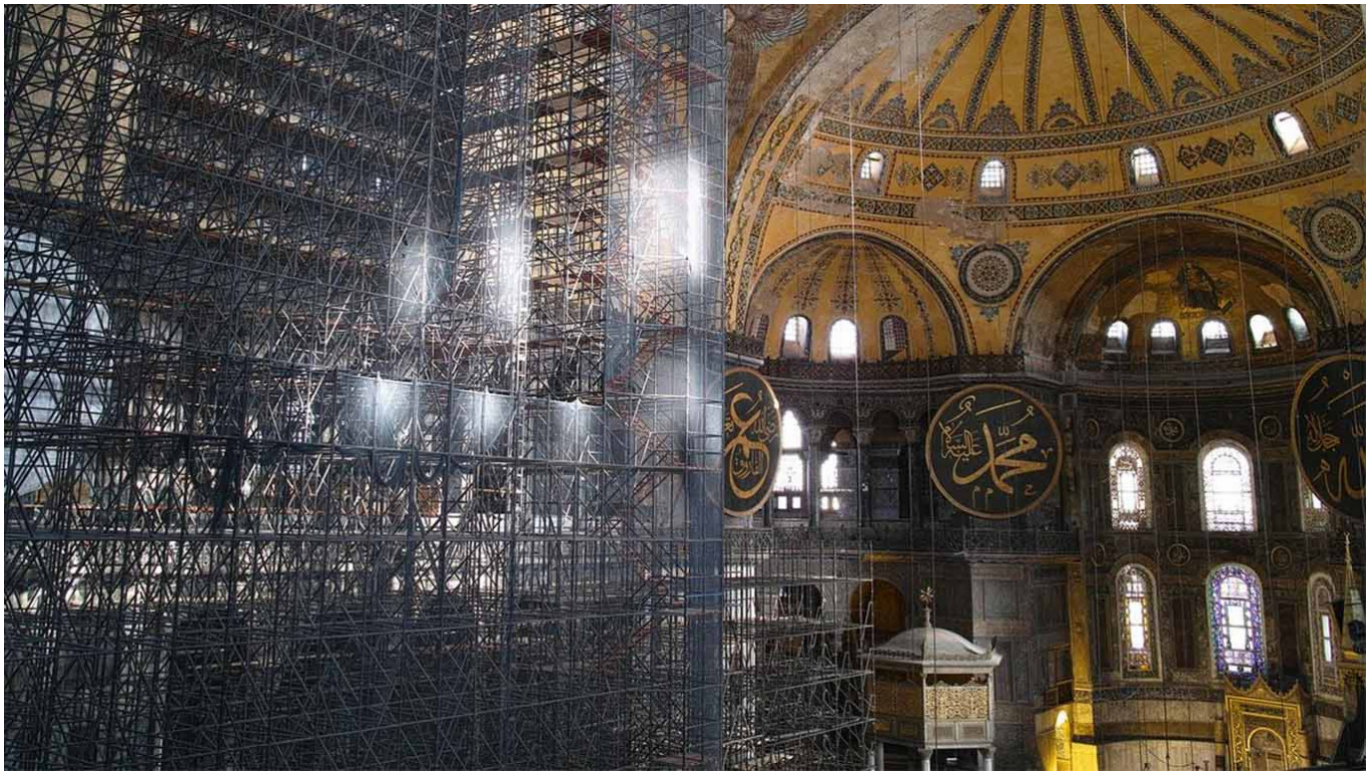
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Russia to Help Syria Build Replica Hagia Sophia Following Turkish Mosque Conversion

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The Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. **Pixabay**

Russia will help Syria construct a replica of the Hagia Sophia that will operate as an Orthodox cathedral, a Russian lawmaker has said after Turkey converted the iconic Istanbul museum into a mosque this month.

The UNESCO World Heritage site's conversion has sparked outcry worldwide, with political and religious leaders saying the structure had been an important symbol of interfaith unity.

Russia will provide funding for the miniature Hagia Sophia in the western Syrian province of Hama to show the importance of "peaceful dialogue" between faiths, conservative lawmaker Vitaly Milonov said.

"Syria, unlike Turkey, is a country that clearly shows the possibility of peaceful and positive interfaith dialogue," Milonov told the state-run RIA Novosti news agency earlier this month.

“President Bashar al-Assad would never transfer a cathedral from one denomination to another.”

Preparations for its construction in the Hama province city of Al-Suqaylabiyah will begin next month, the Lebanese Al-Modon news outlet reported Tuesday.

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The project is reportedly the brainchild of pro-regime militia leader Nabeul Al-Abdullah. Abdullah presented his plans to the Russian military after obtaining approval from the metropolitan bishop of the Greek Orthodox Church in Hama, Al-Modon reported.

“I think that all of Russia will want to help. This will truly be a landmark event for all Orthodox people; I am sure that every Orthodox Christian wants his name to be inscribed in at least a stone or brick of the new Hagia Sophia,” Milonov said.

Moscow is backing the project as part of efforts to justify its military intervention in Syria by highlighting links between the war-torn country’s Orthodox Christian population and Russia, Syrian opposition activists told Al-Modon. Russia, a staunch ally of Assad, has been involved in the Syrian conflict since 2015.

The site of the new cathedral is reportedly located a few kilometers from Turkish army bases in Hama.

The Hagia Sophia was constructed as an Orthodox Christian cathedral during the Byzantine Empire but converted into a mosque after the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453. It welcomed its first Muslim worshippers last week after almost nine decades as a museum.

The Russian Orthodox Church expressed dismay at Turkey’s decision and the Russian Foreign Ministry said Moscow “noted with regret” Ankara’s move.

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