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ASIA/TURKEY – Mobilisation to reconvert Ayasofya Musem back into a mosque

Istanbul (Agenzia Fides) – In an Istanbul braced for the first anniversary of the Gezi Park revolt, the Saudi Imam Abdullah Basfar is to lead street prayers organised for Saturday 31 May in front of Ayasofya Museum to demand that the former Mosque be reconverted into a place of Muslim worship. The initiative is promoted by the Committee for the Conquest of Constantinople – a body founded in 1950 under pressure from nationalist Islamic groups – and has the support of Anatolia Youth, a militant organisation inspired by the late nationalist politician Necmettin Erbakan, who died in 2011. « It is our duty» said Salih Turhan, today president of Anatolia Youth «to restore Ayasofya to its original state to demonstrate Islamic predomination in this area and to fulfil the wishes of the nation ».
In the convulsive moment lived by Turkey, the original Byzantine Basilica of Saint Sofia – transformed into a mosque in 1453, and then reduced to a museum by Kemal Ataturk in1935 – would appear to be at the centre of political manoeuvers of those who, also in government circles, aim to gain consensus offering concessions of highly symbolic impact to Turkish nationalism of Islamic nature. In November last year even Turkey's influential vice-premier Bulent Arinc stated in public that in his eyes the historic place of worship appears to be «sad» today, whereas soon it will be a «joyful» place when it houses the prayers of Muslim believers once again.
The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I, has often expressed his opposition to the reconversion into a mosque of the former historic Christian Basilica. According to Turkish sources consulted by Fides, also intellectuals and academics – historians, architects, journalists, started , in mid May, to collect signatures to increase public awareness of the matter, with the intention of documenting the absolute absence of historic foundation for the offensive of nationalism of Islamic nature . The campaign, sponsored by the History Foundation of Turkey, aims to launch a « platform for the custody of cultural heritage» with the intent to monitor and denounce abuses and exploitation perpetrated for political propaganda. (GV) (Agenzia Fides 31/5/2014).

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