REPORT ON THE

1st UNESCO Advisory mission to the World Heritage property

*Historic Areas of Istanbul (Turkey)*

5 - 9 October 2020

Mounir BOUCHENAKI
Contents

Acknowledgments ............................................................................................................................................................................. 3

I - Background to the mission .......................................................................................................................................................... 3

II - Historical reminder of the inscription of the sites of Hagia Sophia and Chora on the World Heritage List ............................................................................................................................................................................................................. 4

III - Report of discussions and visits concerning these two exceptional heritage sites .......... 4

1 - First contacts in Istanbul ........................................................................................................................................................................ 4

2 - First working session ........................................................................................................................................................................... 5

3 - UNESCO's principle position ............................................................................................................................................................. 6

4 - The position of the Representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs .......................................................................................... 6

5 - Visit of Hagia Sophia on the ground floor level ............................................................................................................................. 8

6 - The visit of the Galleries on the floor of Hagia Sophia ................................................................................................................... 12

7 - Visit to the Church of the Holy Saviour in Chora .......................................................................................................................... 13

8 - Meeting with His All Holiness the Patriarch Bartholomew ............................................................................................................ 17

9 - Meeting with the ICOMOS Turkey Committee ........................................................................................................................... 18

10 - Meeting at the Headquarters of the Directorate of Religious Affairs .......................................................................................... 20

11 - Meeting with the Governor of Istanbul, H.E. Ali Yerlikaya ...................................................................................................... 20

IV – Conclusion .................................................................................................................................................................................... 22

ANNEX I: Terms of Reference ............................................................................................................................................................... 24

ANNEX II: Mission programme ............................................................................................................................................................. 25

ANNEX III: List of participants and institutions ....................................................................................................................................... 27

ANNEX IV: List of documents received .............................................................................................................................................. 29
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank all the personalities who received me and who allowed me to carry out this three-day mission under excellent conditions.

I - Background to the mission

The terms of reference of the mission were discussed with the relevant authorities of Turkey, and with H.E. the Turkish Ambassador to UNESCO, Mr. Altay Cengizer who assured me that my mission would include access to the sites in question, as well as meetings with Turkish experts from the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Presidency of Religious Affairs, as well as the Turkish National Commission for UNESCO. He informed me that I could discuss the situation with any institutions or personalities having knowledge of the matter. H.E. the Ambassador of Turkey recalled the conditions under which the change of status had been decided so that Hagia Sophia would once again become a mosque as it had been for several centuries, likewise as for the Church of Holy Savior in Chora, both designated as museums, the first in 1934 by President Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and the second in 1945, at the end of the Second World War. The World Heritage Centre provided me with the documentation relating to the recent decree of 10 July 2020 from the President of the Republic of Turkey, that modified the status of the Hagia Sophia Museum into a mosque, and by a new presidential decree of 21 August 2020, that ordered the conversion of the Church of Holy Savior in Chora into a mosque. These are two of the components of the “Historic Areas of Istanbul” property inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1985 on the basis of criteria I, II, III and IV.

I also met with H.E. the Ambassador of Greece to UNESCO, Mrs. Maria Diamantopoulou, who informed me of the great concern of her country following the change of status of the two monuments of Istanbul in view of the important symbolic value they represent for the Orthodox Community. Likewise, I had a meeting H.E. the Ambassador of the Russian Federation to UNESCO, Mr. Alexander Kouznetsov, who recall the concerns expressed by his country regarding the change of status of the two monuments, which fall under both the Christian religion and the Muslim religion, and whose neutral status as museums promoted a universal approach and coexistence in a space where the symbols of these two monotheistic religions were associated.
II - Historical reminder of the inscription of the sites of Hagia Sophia and Chora on the World Heritage List

As underlined by the work of the 9th session of the World Heritage Committee meeting in 1985 in Paris, “Istanbul was successively the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire and the Ottoman Empire and was associated with major events of political history, religious history and the history of art for more than 2,000 years.

Istanbul's Outstanding Universal Value lies in its unique integration of architectural masterpieces that reflect the meeting of Europe and Asia over several centuries and in its incomparable skyline composed by the creative genius of Byzantine and Ottoman architects.

Istanbul's distinctive and characteristic skyline has been built over the centuries and includes Hagia Sophia whose grand dome reflects the architectural and decorative expertise of the sixth century, as well as the works of chief architect Sinan who are a reflection of the heyday of Ottoman architecture in the sixteenth century.”

An architectural achievement dating from different imperial eras, the ancient Church of the Holy Savior in Chora with its mosaics and paintings from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, is considered "a jewel of Byzantine art for its sumptuous frescoes and mosaics which completely cover its walls and domes.”

III - Report of discussions and visits concerning these two exceptional heritage sites

1 - First contacts in Istanbul

As soon as I arrived in Istanbul, where I was greeted by two representatives from the Ministry of Culture (Mrs. K. Neşe AKDOĞAN and Mrs. İpek ÖZBEK), discussions began with the Representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Emir Salim Yüksel, Deputy Director General for Cultural Diplomacy, and with Ms. Dr. Olcay Aydemir, Director of Istanbul Survey and Monuments.

The dialogue established from the outset created an atmosphere of understanding and frankness which enabled me to express the serious concern of the Director-General of UNESCO, Mrs.
Audrey Azoulay, who declared "that she deeply regretted the decision of the Turkish authorities, taken without prior dialogue, to modify the statute of Saint Sophia”.

I also quoted the Assistant Director-General of UNESCO for Culture, Mr. Ernesto Ottone Ramirez, who considered that “It is important to avoid any implementation measure that is not previously discussed with the UNESCO, and which would have consequences on physical access, on the structure of the building, on movable property and on the site management method”.

To my question as to why UNESCO was not informed, the answer was that it was necessary to avoid any confusion which could have arisen during the treatment of the file by the highest legal body of the country, and especially before its verdict was final.

2 - First working session
The first working session with all the participants listed above, took place on 6 October 2020 at the premises of the Istanbul Science and Technology Museum.

All administrations were represented, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Culture, Turkish National Commission for UNESCO, Department of Museums, Department of Pious Foundations, Representative of the Scientific Committee, as well as the site manager.

The Director of Istanbul Survey and Monuments, Dr. Olcay Aydemir chaired the first working session with a Powerpoint presentation of the ongoing conservation and restoration works in both Hagia Sophia and Chora. This allowed me to have an overview of the current state of the regular maintenance works of the monuments where I could subsequently note the use of the most up-to-date techniques in this field, under the supervision of the Scientific Committee.

The classic phases in this type of intervention were presented: identification, documentation and analysis of structures regularly subjected to vibrations due to earthquakes with the appearance of cracks, study of water infiltration by capillary rise, occasional interventions on pavements and parietal mosaics, etc ...

I should point out that the joint mission to Istanbul led by the World Heritage Centre and ICOMOS in April 2019, had indicated in its summary that "conservation works are in general in accordance with recognized international standards".

No new projects in or around Hagia Sophia were brought to my attention by the team of Turkish experts who accompanied me during my two-day visits to Hagia Sophia and Chora.
3 - UNESCO's principle position

After the first introductory meeting by Dr. Olcay Aydemir, Director of Istanbul Monuments, I presented UNESCO’s policy position on the changes to Hagia Sophia and Chora.

I recalled that the museum function, as specified when the property was inscribed on the World Heritage List, offers a harmonious combination in these monuments allowing free access to all visitors, without authorizing any public religious manifestation of one or the other of the two monotheistic religions (Christianity and Islam) symbolized by this monument.

It is therefore the symbolic value of these two monuments that is currently being questioned, as well as the impact of the modifications made to the aesthetics of the places and to the "spirit of the place" (genius loci).

Likewise, I recalled that UNESCO considered that the change of assignment of Hagia Sophia and Chora should not have been carried out unilaterally, in accordance with the Operational Guidelines for the implementation of the 1972 World Heritage Convention (refer to articles 82, 119, 132, 169, and 172).

I also mentioned the three essential criteria (Outstanding Universal Value, Authenticity and Integrity) which are the basis of the principles of the 1972 UNESCO Convention, in addition to the relevant articles of the “Operational Guidelines for the implementation of the World Heritage Convention”.

I stressed that it is on these bases that the World Heritage Committee will discuss and decide on the change of status of the Hagia Sofia and Chora, which will be the subject to the items of its Agenda.

4 - The position of the Representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The response to this principles position of UNESCO was as follows:

From my observations, my interlocutors told me that “the decision taken by the President of the Republic of Turkey was based on a certain number of official documents, emanating in particular from the religious authorities and that it followed a legal consultation of the High Court of Justice of the State”.

I was reminded that “Hagia Sophia Church had been converted into a mosque during the conquest of Istanbul by Sultan Mehmet II in May 1453 and that it had a very important rank due
to its proximity to the Topkapi Palace. It was part of the ‘(Endowment)’ donation of Fatih Sultan Mehmet, as it appears in the cadastral register.”

In addition, it was clarified to me that “The Association of Permanent Foundations, Historical Works and the Environment” initiated legal proceedings against the State Council of Turkey in 2005 for the annulment of the Decision of the Council of Ministers of 1934, converting the Great Hagia Sophia Mosque into a Museum.”

“Subsequently, and on the basis of the Decision of the Council of State of July 2, 2020, it was decided to open Hagia Sophia to Muslim prayer on the basis of the Presidential Decree dated July 10, 2020”. This decree has, according to my interlocutors, a legal basis from which a memorandum of understanding was signed between the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

Regarding relations with UNESCO, it is explicit, in particular to all of the dimensions relating to the preservation of the Outstanding Universal Value, for which the Ministry of Culture is responsible. For its part, the Ministry of Religious Affairs is only in charge of the organization of religious ceremonies.

In this regard, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey stresses that “the above-mentioned Protocol aims to ensure the preservation, development and sustainability of the historical, cultural, and spiritual values represented by this World Heritage site, and that it thus takes into account concerns relating to the aesthetics of the premises.”

“Before the opening of the monument to prayer on July 24, 2020, Turkey claims to have implemented the new rules concerning the conversion into a Mosque in order to preserve the Universal Value of this value”.
5 - Visit of Hagia Sophia on the ground floor level

Following the presentation and the discussions, the entire group of experts came to the site to see in situ what arrangements had been made since the change in status of this monument.

The surroundings of Hagia Sophia are protected and guarded by the Tourist Police and its access is open to all visitors without any obligation to pay for a ticket, as was the case when it was previously a museum.

When I arrived in front of Hagia Sophia around 11 a.m., I noticed that all visitors, without exception, enter through the same access door and walk along the narthex to the so-called “imperial” door.
Above this imposing cedar door from Lebanon is a mosaic panel that depicts Christ in Majesty and Emperor Leon VI the Sage, or his son Constantine VII Porphyrogenet, who bows before Christ Pantocrator.

This mosaic panel, which remains visible all morning, is covered thanks to an electrical system with a beige canvas displayed during prayer times.

Also, in the corridor of the narthex there is another mosaic panel depicting the Virgin Mary seated on a backless throne and the Child Jesus seated on her knees giving blessing and holding a scroll in her left hand. On the right, stands the Emperor Constantine, in ceremonial costume, presenting a model of the city to Mary. This second panel is covered with a beige canvas during prayer times. It is also activated by an electronic system which allows it to be showcased outside of prayer times. At the entrance corridor of the monument there is a long narrow felt carpet that has been placed along the wall of the narthex. All visitors who enter the heart of the monument must remove their shoes and place them in shoe racks provided.

From there, I could see that all visitors can access the prayer room which corresponds to the main nave, the paving of which in antique marble and is now covered with a green/turquoise wool carpet. The carpet extends to the level of the apse where the mihrab is located (niche indicating the direction of Mecca).

On either side of the central nave, there are wooden panels that separate the prayer room for men which occupies the central space, and the north aisles are reserved for women during prayers. Outside of prayer times, all of these spaces are accessible.
An important point to note is that the "Omphalos", near the apse and the mihrab, is not covered. The area is roughly a total of six-by-six meters. One of the hallmarks of Hagia Sophia is the marble section of the floor known as the "Omphalos". The "Omphalos", located under the dome of the monument, presents as a square space composed of 30 marble circles of different sizes and various colours, and within the middle, there is a large circle.

This marble paving is comprised of varying colours from different countries of the Mediterranean, and is arranged in the form of a "opus sectile". It remains visible and protected by a small cord separation.

It was explained to me that this was the location of the area reserved for the 'Coronation' of the Emperors in Byzantine Times, and that was the reason it was left accessible for visitors, given its symbolic value. Moreover, the location is considered by the Orthodox Church as one of the most sacred places in the Byzantine world.

In the conch above the apse is the large mosaic depicting the Virgin Mary seated on a throne set with precious stones with the Infant Jesus clad in gold on her knees.

This panel is regularly covered during prayers by a beige veil, similar to the two mosaics located at the entrance. It should be noted that this veil is made by several segments that are electronically activated. This mosaic remains visible in its entirety throughout the morning.
In conclusion of the visit of this central part of the monument on the ground floor, I was able to note that the two main physical interventions, which could be reversible, concerned the installation of a vast prayer rug on the largest surface of the central nave and aisles. This included the establishment of openwork wooden partitions between this central nave and its aisles. The green/turquoise colour of the carpet is quite striking and creates a contrast with the general aesthetic of this central part of the monument. It seems to me that prayer rugs of more appropriate colours could be unrolled during prayers and rolled up after prayer to ensure ‘breathing’ of the ground and not to permanently mask the architectural and aesthetic coherence of the building. There is also a long narrow felt carpet where visitors and prayers alike take off their shoes and put their shoes in wooden lockers. Considering the lighting of the narthex and the neutral colour of this rug, the contrast is much less noticeable than in the main room.

It should be noted that the temporary and daily electronically activated coverings of the three panels of these mosaics do not touch the surface of the mosaic. In addition, I was assured that the mechanisms allowing the movements of the canvas were already attached to existing elements and that no holes were made in the wall at the level of these mosaics.

I took note of this information, which was confirmed to me by an expert Byzantinologist, Professor at Istanbul University, Dr. Asnu-Bilban Yalçin, author of an article entitled "Recent Restoration Work in the Hagia Sophia Museum" and published in “Archeology of a World of Change”, Oxford
2020) which stated “that not a single nail has been planted in Hagia Sophia since its conversion into a mosque”.

6 - The visit of the Galleries on the floor of Hagia Sophia

The tour of the first-floor galleries of Hagia Sophia took place in the afternoon of Tuesday 6 October. A long ramp, from the northern part of the outer narthex, leads to the upper gallery.

The upper gallery is known to have been reserved for the Empress and her court. It surrounds the entire nave and up to the apse. The gallery floor is covered with marble slabs which are currently undergoing restorations, temporarily preventing visitors from getting there.

Discoveries of an arched structure below the paving near the entrance to the galleries revealed the technique used to reduce the weight of the marble paving. This part of the gallery is being consolidated.

Many slabs cracked as a result of vibrations due to the earthquakes affecting Istanbul and are being consolidated by a team of conservators that I saw working on site.

The arcades of the upper level, on the side looking towards the central nave, have retained their rich decoration of marble inlays and their mosaics with vine scrolls below.
The parietal mosaic panels at the gallery level are relatively well preserved and will not be covered, as stated by the experts and the site manager.

The following mosaics can be seen: Emperor Alexander mosaic, Empress Zoe mosaic, Commenus mosaic, and the "Deisis" mosaic known as the "Supplication".

At this level, no intervention has been reported on either the lower surface of the colonnade or on the mosaic panels, as this entire space will not be used for religious ceremonies. It will be open to visitors, as in the past, and this was confirmed by experts from the Ministry of Culture as well as by the two "Muftis" of the mosque who accompanied me during the visit to the galleries.

7 - Visit to the Church of the Holy Saviour in Chora

The visit to the Church of the Holy Saviour in Chora (in Turkish Kariye Müzesi, Kariye Kilisesi or Kariye Camii either “Chora museum”, “Chora Church” or “Chora Mosque”) was organized on Wednesday 7 October in the presence of the same group of experts who attended the Hagia Sophia visit the day before.

According to most experts, this is one of the finest examples of Byzantine-era churches. It is located in the western district of Edirne Kapi, in an area where elements of traditional wooden architecture still remain. This church was converted in 1511 into a mosque, then was converted into a museum in 1945, and most recently converted into a mosque on 21 August by presidential decree.
The Church of the Holy Saviour in Chora is one of the components of the “Historic areas of Istanbul” which was inscribed in 1985 on the World Heritage List.

The Representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs told me that the legal property of Chora falls under "the Endowment of Atik Ali Pasha "and that its reconversion into a Mosque followed the same legal procedure as that of Hagia Sophia, concretized by a Presidential Decree of August 21, 2020.”

That said, it has not yet been fully converted into a mosque, as it is at present, entirely covered by an exterior scaffolding and the work being undertaken prior to the Decree of 21 August 2020 is entering its third phase.

At the entrance to Chora, there is a small gatehouse on site where entrance tickets are sold for visitors as if it were still a museum.

The building consists of three main areas: the entrance hall called "narthex", the main body of the church called "naos", and the adjoining chapels called "paracclesion".

For all Byzantinological experts, the mosaics and frescoes which decorate the walls and vaults of this church “are in quantity and quality among the most important pictorial works of those bequeathed by Byzantine artists. They were made around the time of Giotto”.

![Image of the Church of the Holy Saviour in Chora](image)
However, inside, arrangements to cover three parietal panels of mosaics have already been completed in preparation for this building for Muslim worship.

The first is the famous mosaic of the “Dormition of the Virgin Mary” depicted above the central door of the nave.
The other two mosaics are on either side of the entrance to the apse and represent on the left, Jesus Christ blessing with the right hand and holding the Gospel in his left hand, and on the right panel an image of the Virgin Mary with the Baby Jesus.

The system of temporary coverings of these three mosaics were carried out with care. They were not attached to the walls but were hung on fixed bars placed between the walls of the apse in the course of the 1960s by the "Byzantine Institute of America and the Dumbarton Oaks Center for Byzantine Studies", according to the explanations given to me by the Turkish experts.

The curtain, electronically controlled, is similar in colour to the grooves in the marble that lines the walls and appears to have been made without aesthetic contrast to the naos.

A visit to the conservation and restoration site in the upper parts of the building allowed me to note the quality of the works of consolidating the frescoes and the mosaic panels. This is also what the UNESCO - ICOMOS mission had recorded in its report of 15-16 April 2019. Extract from the report: “The current conservation project for the Chora Museum has been meticulously planned, based on extensive analysis… of the surviving decorative schemes is intended to clean and to stabilize rather in any way to restore”.

The monument's stability problems are also taken care of by an intervention aimed at ensuring the reinforcement of the foundations and minimizing the cracks that appear in various places of the facades and vaults.
As a conclusion following the two visits to these World Heritage sites rich in wall decorations, and given their high artistic value, I proposed that an International Seminar on the Conservation on Mosaics and Frescoes could be organized by the Turkish Authorities, either in 2021 or 2022, depending on the sanitary situation that the world is currently facing.

8 - Meeting with His All Holiness the Patriarch Bartholomew

Thanks to the assistance of the Permanent Delegation of Greece to UNESCO and the Consulate General of Greece in Istanbul, I was able to have a meeting on Wednesday 7 October 2020, at the beginning of the afternoon for about an hour with His Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, accompanied by two Church Fathers.

After a conversation recalling the importance of the above-mentioned monuments for the Orthodox Community, His All Holiness the Patriarch handed me a copy of the statement he made about Hagia Sophia on 30 June 2020 (annexed to this report).
He recalled what he communicated to the press following the decision to convert Hagia Sophia and Chora into mosques:

“We have been hurt by the conversion of Hagia Sophia and the Church of Chora into mosques. These two unique monuments of Constantinople were built like Christian churches. They express the universal spirit of our faith and the love and hope of eternity. The unique mosaics and icons are food for the soul and a remarkable sight for the eyes’, as Greek writer and painter Fotis Kontoglou would say. They are part of the world's cultural heritage”.

His All Holiness recalled that "Hagia Sophia is a unique monument which has a sacred value for the two monotheistic religions, and because it served as a place of prayers addressed to God for 900 years for Christians and for 500 years for Muslims.”

For His All Holiness, “Hagia Sophia must be the place and the symbol of the meeting, of the dialogue and of the peaceful coexistence of peoples and cultures, with mutual understanding and solidarity between Christianity and Islam, vital and beneficial considerations in the world. contemporary ”.

9 - Meeting with the ICOMOS Turkey Committee
I was able to have a meeting on Thursday morning 8 October 2020 with three representatives of the ICOMOS Committee of Turkey, its former President, Professor Zeinep Ahunbay and two of her colleagues, Dr. Ayşe Ege Yıldırım and Dr. Burçin Altıntay.

This meeting took place at the Museum of Science and Technology and lasted more than an hour and a half, during which the position of ICOMOS Turkey was clarified and accompanied by two documents relating to Hagia Sophia and Chora (in Annex).

The discussion focused on the position of ICOMOS Turkey which emphasizes the following points:

- ICOMOS Turkey complains that it was neither invited nor associated with the evaluation of the impact of the change of status of the two monuments, Hagia Sophia and Chora.
- The Chairperson of the Committee who is normally a Member of the Scientific Committee for this landmark monument was not consulted.
- The change of status has led to restrictions. ICOMOS wishes there to be no restriction on the visit.
- The placement of the prayer rug will create a lot of condensation below and will therefore affect the conservation of the marble slabs dating from Antiquity.
- It is recalled that there was already a small space for Muslim prayer near the eastern facade of the monument.
- It is essential that the change in use does not make it difficult to understand and perceive Hagia Sophia as a masterpiece of 6th century art and architecture.

In this regard, the recommendation of ICOMOS Turkey for Hagia Sophia is as follows: “The presentation of Hagia Sophia, intact with all its strata, should not be obstructed, so that this magnificent monument of world architectural history may continue to inspire us all as a symbol of interfaith, brotherhood and world peace”.

And the recommendations for the Chora site (also called Kariye) are as follows: “All interventions related to the last change of use at Kariye must be guided by the awareness that the monument is a cultural heritage site; the monument must therefore be perceived and preserved as a whole with all its spaces and content, without harming either the authentic architecture, or the mosaics and frescoes.

It should not be forgotten that protecting Kariye in a professional and holistic manner, which includes perception, experience, retention, management and ensuring continued access to information about her tangible and intangible values, is important both to safeguard the collective memory and the future of this cultural heritage site”.
10 - Meeting at the Headquarters of the Directorate of Religious Affairs

A meeting took place at the premises of the Directorate of Religious Affairs in Sultan Ahmet on the afternoon of Thursday, 8 October 2020, in the presence of two Vice-Muftis (Muslim clerics appointed by the Presidency of Religious Affairs): Professor Mehmet Boynukalı̇n and Professor Esat Yapıcı.

These two personalities accompanied the experts from the Ministry of Culture, during the visit to the Hagia Sophia and expressed their respect for the site inscribed on the Heritage List. They stressed that the fact that their responsibility lies in the monitoring of daily practices, prayers and religious accompaniment of the faithful. They informed me that everything related to the protection and management of the monument is the responsibility of the Ministry of Culture with which a memorandum of understanding has been signed.

They assured me that no structural modifications or change of furniture present in Hagia Sophia will be made by their department.

11 - Meeting with the Governor of Istanbul, H.E. Ali Yerlikaya

At the end of the day on Thursday, 8 October 2020 I was received by H.E. Mr. Ali Yerlikaya, Governor of Istanbul, at the Headquarters of the Governorate in the historic Bâb-ı Âli complex in Çağaloğlu. The discussion focused on the conditions of the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque and the legal process leading up to this action.

While affirming the importance of this monument, which has been used as a mosque for five centuries, the Governor recalled that the majority of the Turkish population wanted to return to this function in the future.

As a result, the Governor considered that it was a democratic measure that the President of the Republic had proclaimed Hagia Sophia as a mosque, after obtaining the agreement of the High Court of Justice. Furthermore, it was also his desire to maintain the site for the benefit of all visitors.

The Governor also stated that the modifications made have been carefully studied to avoid any physical damage or any transformation in the eyes of visitors, except for the installation of temporary veils on some mosaics during prayers.

The President, he noted, insisted that the site be freely accessible to all visitors. A visit to Hagia Sophia by ambassadors accredited to Turkey was organized on Friday, 7 August 2020, at the
invitation of the Turkish Government, in order to show respect for the monument and to note the freedom of access.

Previously, entry to Hagia Sophia was chargeable and statistics show that almost 4 million people visited Hagia Sophia in 2019, recognized then as the most visited monument in Turkey. As a result, and since there is no more revenue, the Government has committed to take charge of all maintenance and restoration works to safeguard the exceptional value of the monument and its surroundings.

He wished, in conclusion, that the discussions and the dialogue with UNESCO could help to understand the decision taken for Hagia Sophia and Chora, without altering the respect shown by the Turkish State to other traditions and beliefs.
IV – Conclusion

On the sidelines of the scheduled meetings, I was able to have a brief conversation with the Minister of Culture and Tourism H.E. Mr. Mehmet Nuri Ersoy, Minister of Culture and Tourism on the occasion of an inauguration of the Galata Tower’s restoration and conversion into a museum, held on Tuesday 6 October 2020.

I was able to meet, on a personal basis, the Turkish writer, Mr. Nedim Gürsel, who wrote an article on the newspaper Le Monde about the conversion of Hagia Sophia.

Finally, since my return from this short mission I have been in contact with Dr. Bissera Pentcheva, Byzantinologist and art historian at Stanford University. She specialized in the study of Hagia Sophia and more particularly on the aesthetic and acoustic questions of this monument.

I will, with her consent, transfer all the documentation she sent me to the World Heritage Centre. I was also contacted by a lawyer working in New York, Mrs. Christina Hioureas, who is preparing a legal file on the two monuments at the request of the Orthodox Archdiocese of America. I will also share the documents she provided me with the World Heritage Centre.
Upon my return from this mission, I continued to be in contact in November and December 2020, via mail, with the Turkish experts who accompanied me. I asked them additional questions on the basis of new information’s transmitted to UNESCO, namely on the toilets construction near Hagia Sofya and on additional coverings of frescoes and mosaics at Chora.

On the basis of the reply I received, I consider that another UNESCO Advisory mission should be useful to be undertaken for completing the survey already done and maintaining the dialogue on this important issue of change of status of a World Heritage site. All documents I received by mail from Officials from Turkey are attached to the present report.
ANNEX I: Terms of Reference

UNESCO Advisory Mission

to the World Heritage Property “Historic Areas of Istanbul” (Turkey)

TERMS OF REFERENCE

The “Historic Areas of Istanbul” were inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1985 based on Criteria (i), (ii), (iii) and (iv). The state of conservation of the Historic Areas of Istanbul will be reviewed by the 44th session of the World Heritage Committee.

Further to the decisions of Turkey in July and August 2020 to turn Hagia Sophia and Chora into mosques, despite the fact that they were museums at the time of the inscription as integral components of the World Heritage property, the Advisory Mission will:

1. Collect all relevant documents, Court decisions, decrees and protocols related to the Decision to change the status of the Hagia Sophia and Chora component (to be provided by the State Party in one of the working languages of UNESCO and by official translation);

2. Assess any works done to the Hagia Sophia and Chora, both for their interior (including movable elements) and their exterior and be informed of any additional works that are currently being designed or planned for the upcoming months;

3. Evaluate the situation and the buildings surrounding the Hagia Sophia, the Hagia Sophia Madrasah and the Chora Museum;

4. Meet with representatives of the State Party, the Ministry of Culture, Board of Religious Affairs, the Historic Areas of Istanbul Site Management Directorate, the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality and ICOMOS Turkey and hold consultative discussions;

5. Prepare a concise report to be submitted to UNESCO and its World Heritage Centre by 30 October 2020 at the latest.
ANNEX II: Mission programme

05 October 2020 – Monday
10:45  Departure from Paris CDG Airport (TK 1822)
15:15  Arrival to Istanbul
16:00  Departure from Istanbul Airport
       (distance: 40 km., time: 45 minutes)
17:00  Arrival to hotel (Hotel de Camondo)
18:30  Dinner

06 October 2020 - Tuesday
09:00  Departure from Hotel
09:30-10:00 Meeting with participants and Sharing Information regarding the program
       (Museum of the History of Islamic Science and Technology)
10:00-11:00 Presentation of Restoration Works carried out in Hagia Sophia Grand Mosque
       Presented by Istanbul Directorate of Survey and Monuments
       (Museum of the History of Islamic Science and Technology/ Gülhane Parkı - Sirkeci)
11:00-12:00 Presentation of Restoration Works carried out in Kariye (Chora) Mosque
       Presented by Istanbul Directorate of Survey and Monuments
       (Museum of the History of Islamic Science and Technology/ Gülhane Parkı - Sirkeci)
12:30-14:00 Lunch
14:00-17:00 Visit to Hagia Sophia Grand Mosque
17:30-19.00 Departure from the site and Visit to the Archaeological Museum

07 October 2020 – Wednesday
09:30  Departure from Hotel
10:00-12:30 Visit to Kariye (Chora) Mosque
12:30-13:00 Lunch
13:00: Audience by His All Holiness, the Ecumenical Patriarch, H.S. Bartholomew at Ana Rum Orthodox Manastiri.

14:30-15:30: Presentation of Restoration Works to be carried out in Hagia Sophia Grand Mosque
Presented by Istanbul Directorate of Survey and Monuments

15:30-17:00: Presentation of Restoration Works to be carried out in Kariye (Chora) Mosque
Presented by Istanbul Directorate of Survey and Monuments

(Museum of the History of Islamic Science and Technology/ Gülhane Parkı - Sirkeci)

17:00-18:30: General Concluding Remarks.
19:00: Dinner

08 October 2020 – Thursday

10:00: Departure from Hotel

10:30-12:00: Meeting with the President of ICOMOS Turkey, Professor Zeynep Ahunbay and her colleagues at (Museum of the History of Islamic Science and Technology/ Gülhane Parkı - Sirkeci)

12:30-13:00: Private discussion with Turkish Author Mr. Nedim Gürsel

14:00-15:00: Meeting with HE the Governor of Istanbul, Mr. Ali Yerlikaya

16.00: Meeting at Suleymanieh Religious Deparment with two Mufti, Professor Mehmet Boynukalin and Professor Murat Topici.

17:30 – 18.00: Visit of the Small Hagia Sophia

09 Ekim 2020-Friday

10:30: Departure from Hotel to Airport
(distance: 40 km., time: 45-60 minutes)

12:00: Arrival to Istanbul Airport

14:55: Departure from Istanbul (TK1827) to Paris.
ANNEX III: List of participants and institutions

- Cengiz UĞUR, Head of Department, Directorate General for Cultural Heritage and Museums
- K. Neşe AKDOĞAN, Branch Manager, Directorate General for Cultural Heritage and Museums
- İpek ÖZBEK, Expert, Directorate General for Cultural Heritage and Museums
- Zeynep AKTÜRE, UNESCO Turkish National Commission
- Murat ÇAĞLAYAN, UNESCO Turkish National Commission
- Şule ÜRÜN, UNESCO Turkish National Commission
- Emir Salim YÜKSEL, Deputy General Director, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Mustafa TURAL, Site Manager of Istanbul Historic Areas
- Asnu Bilban YALÇIN, Member of the Scientific Advisory Board
- Olcay AYDEMİR, Director of Istanbul Directorate of Survey and Monuments
- Sevinç ÖZEK, İstanbul Directorate of Survey and Monuments
- Nurcan SEFER, İstanbul Regional Directorate of Pious Foundations
- Presindency of Religious Affairs, Deputy Mufti
- Hayrullah CENGİZ, Director of Hagia Sophia Museum
- Esra ÖZKAYA, Interpreter
- Züleyha YILMAZ, Interpreter
- His All Holiness, the Ecumenical Patriarch, H.S. Bartholomew at Ana Rum Orthodox Manastiri
- Professor Zeynep Ahunbay, President of ICOMOS Turkey
- Mr. Nedim Gürsel Turkish Author
- Mr. Ali Yerlikay, Governor of Istanbul,
- Professor Mehmet Boynukalin and Professor Murat Topici, Mufti
©New York Times

All other pictures belong to the author of the report
ANNEX IV: List of documents received

Official documents supporting the decision of the change of status of Hagia Sophia and Chora:

a. Cover letter from the Permanent Delegation of Turkey to UNESCO – 28 October 2020;
b. Unofficial translations of the title deeds of Hagia Sophia and Chora;
c. Unofficial translations of the Presidential Decrees of 10 July and 21 August 2020;
d. Unofficial translation of the ‘Protocol on the Conservation, Development, Promotion and Management Activities to be conducted in the Grand Mosque of Hagia Sophia’ signed between the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the Presidency of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Turkey.