

# ARMENIAN BOYCOTT CALLS FOR AGHTAMAR MASS GROW

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## TODAY'S ZAMAN

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The Turkish government agreed to open the 1,100-year-old Cathedral of the Holy Cross on Aghtamar, an island in Lake Van, for a one-day religious service on Sept. 19, an event that could become an annual occurrence. Many believe that the religious service at the church, which is now a state museum, could be a symbol of reconciliation between Turkey and Armenia, two neighbors bitterly divided over history and the fate of the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region. Turkish-Armenians have welcomed the move and Karekin II, the Catholicos of All Armenians, has agreed to send two senior clerics to the church for the Mass.

But others, in Armenia and elsewhere, say the event should be boycotted. "Those calling for a boycott indicate that the true aim of the Turkish authorities is to score propaganda points with the European Union and the United States, by feigning tolerance towards Christians and other minorities," Harut Sassounian, the publisher of The California Courier, an English-Language Armenian weekly based in Glendale, California, said in an article published this week.

Sassounian reminded readers that there have been questions raised about the prudence of attending the church service. "In reality, successive Turkish governments have carried out a systematic policy of eliminating all visible signs of Armenian presence throughout Western Armenia (Eastern Turkey) for over nine decades, during which more than 2,000 Armenian churches and monasteries have been destroyed or converted into non-religious use," he argued.

Sassounian also criticized the Turkish government's classification of the historic church as a "museum" and it allowing only one service in a year. He said there is "no reason for Armenians to be grateful to a country that, after confiscating and destroying thousands of churches, is now allowing a religious ceremony in a single church, which it classifies as a museum."

There have also been some calls for a boycott in Armenia, including from the ruling Republican Party of Armenia. The party spokesman, Eduard Sharmazanov, denounced the Turkish government's decision to reopen the church for a one-day religious ceremony as a publicity stunt and "provocation" aimed at misleading the international community.

"Once again, instead of taking a serious step, the Turks are staging a show," Sharmazanov told Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's (RFE/RL) Armenian service earlier this month. "I don't think you can

achieve tolerance and solidarity between civilizations in that way."

Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) political affairs director Giro Manoyan has also urged Armenians to boycott the Mass. "I think it would be wrong to go there on a day set by Turkey and especially in these conditions of blockade and so on," Manoyan told the RFE/RL. "I don't want to blame believers willing to go there but they must know that they somewhat contribute to the Turkish provocation," he added. Manoyan expressed regret for the decision of Karekin II to send clerics to the Mass as well. "I'm not sure that's the right step," he said.

But a spokesman for Karekin II rejected the calls for a boycott. "We believe that if we are given an opportunity to cherish a shrine that had functioned for centuries but is devoid of prayer today for some reasons, we must use even that single day in order to assert our rights and ownership to the shrine with our participation," Father Vahram Melikian told the RFE/RL.

The Mass is to be officiated by Archbishop Aram Ateshyan, who currently leads the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul. The church was opened in 2007 following a restoration project by the Turkish government that cost \$1.7 million.

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