Dear \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,

Do you believe in religious freedom? Do you believe in human rights? If you do, then you must join the global voices of outrage over the decision of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to convert the museum and Cathedral of Hagia Sophia into a mosque.

Hagia Sophia (the “Church of the Holy Wisdom”) has stood in Istanbul for over 1500 years. After the fall of the Byzantine Empire in 1453, Sultan Mehmet II converted the church into a mosque but respected its religious significance by not destroying the unique iconography and religious symbols. In 1935, the leader of modern Turkey, Kemal Ataturk, converted it into a museum. In 1985, Hagia Sophia Cathedral became a UNESCO World Heritage Site of “outstanding universal value” to all people.

In converting this historic Cathedral and museum, President Erdogan ignored: (a) the condemnation of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom and the tenets of the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) that hold Turkey accountable for acts that violate religious freedoms in his country; (b) the words of the Islamic Society of North America, saying “The conversion of Hagia Sophia will reopen the wounds of…Christian communities across sectarian bounds around the world”; (c) the requests of international allies, fellow Muslim brothers, and Christian minorities struggling to live a peaceful existence as Turkish citizens; and (d) the teachings of his own Islamic faith, that prohibit the desecration of a place of worship of Christians, Jews and other faiths.

Instead, he has consistently instigated intolerance and assaults on Turkey’s Christian communities and the Ecumenical Patriarchate of the Orthodox Christian church, including converting numerous previous Orthodox churches into mosques. Geopolitical and regional historians suggest this is a purposeful move by President Erdogan to galvanize his voting base, and politicize “religious freedom,” a right that should be afforded to all people. The years of empty promises to be a religiously tolerant society for all of Turkey’s minorities have instead resulted in more church confiscations and restrictions on religious minorities.

The Western Wall in Jerusalem is an integral part of the Jewish faith. St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome is an integral part of the Catholic faith. Similarly, Hagia Sophia will always be a global religious symbol and a central part of the Orthodox Christian faith practiced by over 300 million people. Religious freedom and human rights advocates should be outraged by these, and other, recent aggressive and inhumane actions.

I am asking for your help in reversing this intolerable decision by President Erdogan. Rather than promoting a most-favored nation trade status with Turkey, America should withhold all forms of assistance, and demand reversal of this blatant disregard of religious freedom and international laws and conventions, just as it did in 2018 with the pressure that secured the release of Pastor Andrew Brunson.

If you profess to be an advocate of religious freedom and human rights, you are called to use every tool at your disposal to seek a reversal of this tragic decision and to publicly speak out against it. President Erdogan, and others who attack religious freedom, must be shown that this illegal, improper and aggressive behavior cannot be tolerated.

 Sincerely,