

Man who burned Koran faces charges for 'harassing Islam'

From the [Telegraph](#), the [Free Speech Union](#) and the [National Secular Society](#)

In what is believed to be a legal first for the UK, FSU member Hamit Coskun has been charged with "harassing the religious institution of Islam" after burning a copy of the Koran during a political protest.



Hamit Coskun burned a Koran in what he said was a protest against Turkey's president and an act of solidarity with an assassinated Iraqi refugee
Credit: Ben Baker/PA

The shadow justice secretary Robert Jenrick has warned that the charge against Hamit Coskun, 50, for harassing the "religious institution of Islam" is a threat to free speech. . . which risks creating a "back door blasphemy law" in Britain . . . There are many things in our society that people find offensive, but that doesn't make them criminal."

It is thought to be the first time that anyone facing such an

offence has been prosecuted for harassing an “institution” in the form of Islam under the Public Order Act.

Coskun’s legal team argues the charge is legally flawed, since “Islam” is not a person for the purposes of the Act – and that convicting him would amount to criminalising the public desecration of a religious text, an act protected in law as a form of political expression.

Human rights lawyer Akua Reindorf KC has said the charge against Hamit Coskun, who in February burnt a Quran outside the Turkish Consulate in London, is “plainly defective”.

Coskun said his display was a protest against the president of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and an act of solidarity with Salwan Momika – an Iraqi refugee who was [assassinated](#) in Sweden in January after burning Qurans in repeated public protests.

Coskun was subsequently charged with “intent to cause against the religious institution of Islam, harassment, alarm or distress”. He has pleaded not guilty.

Reindorf said the charge was “plainly defective on its face” as the “religious institution of Islam” is not a “person” for the purposes of the Public Order Act.

Reindorf added that treating the “religious institution of Islam” as a person was “tantamount to preferring a charge of blasphemy”, and that a conviction on the basis of available facts “would amount to the criminalisation of the act of desecrating a religious text in a public place”.

Blasphemy was abolished as a common law offence in England and Wales in 2008.

The National Secular has this week written to the Crown Prosecution Service urging it to drop the prosecution of Coskun.