

Man who burned Koran guilty of religiously aggravated public order offence

From PA via the [North Wales Chronicle](#) and the [National Secular Society](#)

The burning of a Koran outside the Turkish consulate in London amounted to a religiously aggravated public order offence, a judge has found.



Hamit Coskun arriving at Westminster Magistrates' Court, central London, for an earlier hearing in the case (Ben Whitley/PA)

Hamit Coskun, 50, shouted "f*** Islam", "Islam is religion of terrorism" and "Koran is burning" as he held the flaming Islamic text aloft in Rutland Gardens, Knightsbridge, on February 13, Westminster

Magistrates' Court heard last week.

District Judge John McGarva delivered his verdict at the same court on Monday.

Your actions in burning the Koran where you did were highly provocative, and your actions were accompanied by bad language in some cases directed toward the religion and were motivated at least in part by hatred of followers of the religion

Addressing Coskun, the judge said:

“After considering the evidence, I find you have a deep-seated hatred of Islam and its followers.

Your evidence was that your criticism is of Islam in general, not its followers; I don't accept that. You believe Islam is an ideology that encourages its followers to violence, paedophilia and disregard for the rights of non-believers, you don't distinguish between the two.”

The judge added:

“Standing holding a burning Koran and saying loudly: ‘Koran is burning’ is clearly aimed at provoking others. I do accept that the choice of location was in part that you wanted to protest what you see as the Islamification of Turkey. But you were also motivated by the hatred of Muslims and knew some would be at the location.”

The defendant, who is an atheist, believes that he protested peacefully and burning the Koran amounted to freedom of expression, the court heard.

Religious tolerance is an important British value, but it doesn't require non-believers to respect the blasphemy codes of believers. On the contrary, it requires people of faith to tolerate those who criticise and protest against their religion, just as their values and beliefs are tolerated

Coskun was fined £240, with a statutory surcharge of £96.

Writing on the website of the Secular Society Stephen Evans, the CEO, says that “establishing a right not to be offended sounds the death knell for free expression.”

Coskun's action was political – a protest, in his words, against the “Islamist government of Erdogan, which has made

Turkey a base for radical Islamists". It was also a statement against Islam, a religion Coskun clearly has no time for.

Coskun has his reasons. He was born and raised in Turkey and is of Armenian and Kurdish descent. He and his family have suffered persecution at the hands of Islamists, including his mother's relatives, who were among those murdered in the Armenian Genocide of 1915.

While Coskun was calmly carrying out his one-man protest, another man emerged from nearby buildings. After establishing what was happening, he informed Coskun, "I'm going to kill you." He then left and re-emerged wielding a weapon, attacking Coskun while shouting, "Burning the Quran? It's my religion! You don't burn the Quran!"

The CPS used this act of violence on Coskun to justify their prosecution of him, arguing that the defendant's actions created "a real threat to public order" evidenced by him being attacked by a weapon wielding maniac. A classic case of victim blaming.

If public order laws are being used to curtail our collective right to protest and free speech based on the subjective and unhinged reactions of others, freedom of expression is in a perilous position.

Another troubling aspect of the prosecution was its failure to draw a distinction between the target of Coskun's protest – the religion of Islam – and the followers of Islam: Muslims. The prosecution claimed Coskun's actions were motivated by hostility towards Muslims on the basis that he shouted "Fuck Islam" and labelled it the "religion of terrorists."

Clearly the concept of 'Islamophobia' has distorted the critical distinction between prejudice or hatred directed at Muslims as individuals and robust criticism of Islam or Islamism as ideologies.

Christopher Hitchens once said the term 'Islamophobia' was "put into circulation to try and suggest that a foul prejudice lurks behind any misgivings about Islam's infallible 'message'". The Coskun case is just the latest example of how this conflation plays out. Coskun has repeatedly made clear that his issue is not with Muslims, but radical Islam. But a few unguarded comments during a police interview were enough to convince the judge that his protest was motivated by a "deep seated hatred of Islam and its followers".

Warnings of a return to blasphemy laws are not hyperbolic. Just last year, there was widespread revulsion when Labour backbencher Tahir Ali stood up in Parliament and [called for](#) "measures to prohibit the desecration of all religious texts and the prophets of the Abrahamic religions".

The Government responded by [ruling out](#) any introduction of blasphemy laws. However, the troubling application of public order laws in Coskun's case demonstrates how the UK has edged dangerously close to a prohibition on blasphemy.

Tellingly, the CPS initially charged Hamit with intent to "harass, alarm, or distress" the religious institution of Islam. This charge was only withdrawn after the National Secular Society [provided](#) the CPS with legal advice highlighting the absurdity of such an alleged non-crime.

Desecration of a Quran is a violation of Islamic law, with believers expected to treat the text with utmost respect and reverence. The initial charge perhaps reveals a mindset that appears intent on stifling contentious expression and appeasing those who are most easily offended by imposing sharia principles on protests.

The National Secular Society and the Free Speech Union funded Coskun's legal fees and ensured proper legal representation because we recognised that a successful prosecution in this case could represent the effective criminalisation of damaging

a Quran in public, edging us dangerously close to a prohibition on blasphemy.

To be clear, we don't approve of burning books, whatever their content. But while burning a Quran in a public place may be provocative and offensive to many, it should not automatically be considered criminal. The outcome of this case represents a troubling surrender to Islamic blasphemy codes.