

GERMANY: Liberal mosque founder vows to keep it open despite Egyptian fatwa and death threats

Pro-Erdogan newspaper calls practices 'prayer of the perverse'

By Harriet Agerholm

The Independent (26.06.2017) – <http://ind.pn/2t9dLTo> – The founder of a new liberal mosque in Berlin has vowed to keep the building open in the face of death threats and heavy criticism from religious conservatives.

Seyran Ates told *The Guardian* she was sent “3,000 emails a day full of hate” about the Ibn-Rushd-Goethe Mosque which allows men and women to pray side by side, instead of segregating them.

But the 54-year-old remained defiant. “The pushback I am getting makes me feel that I am doing the right thing,” she said.

Open to both Sunni and Shiite worshippers, as well as members of the LGBTQ community, the mosque shares its premises with a protestant church.

But Ms Ates said no-one wearing a niqab or burqa is allowed entry, claiming the garments are a political statement.

The mosque’s foundation was condemned by Egypt’s state-run Islamic organisation, Dar al-Ifta al-Masriyyah, which said that men and women praying side by side was incompatible with Islam

The country’s al-Azhar university responded to the new

institution by issuing a law banning the foundation of liberal mosques.

Diyinet, Turkey's religious authority, also criticised it.

It said that its practices "do not align with Islam's fundamental resources, principles of worship, methodology or experience of more than 14 centuries, and are experiments aimed at nothing more than depraving and ruining religion".

The religious association linked the mosque to the network of US-based Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen, who Turkish authorities have accused of being behind last year's failed coup.

Ms Ates has denied any connection to Mr Gulen.

Turkey's pro-government *Sabah* newspaper said the mosque practices "the so-called prayer of the perverse".

Ms Ates, who moved from Turkey to Germany as a child, has criticised the oppression of women in certain Muslim communities and called for liberal values to be upheld.

The German government called Turkish criticism of the new mosque, an interference in freedom of religion and opinion.

"I want to be very clear in rejecting all comments that clearly intend to deprive people in Germany of their right to freely exercise their religion and to limit the right to free expression of opinion," said Martin Schaefer, spokesman for the country's Foreign Ministry

Germany, which is home to an estimated 4 million or more people of Turkish origin, is already at loggerheads with Turkey on a number of issues.

Turkish politicians were barred from campaigning in Germany for a referendum on expanding President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's powers.

Turkey's arrest of a German-Turkish journalist working for a German paper also caused friction between the two nations, as did Turkey's refusal to let German parliamentarians visit an air force base hosting German planes.

Mr Schaefer said it was not for the government to determine how people practiced their religion and that it would protect freedom of worship just as it protected freedom of opinion and press freedom.

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GERMANY: Liberal mosque debate turns political in

Germany

Criticism from within the Islamic world has been constant since the first service was held at a new liberal mosque in Berlin. The federal government has come to the defense of the woman who started the initiative.

DW.COM (25.06.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2tcBuCC> – Support has been coming in from high places: With uncharacteristically clear language, the federal government has defended the new, liberal Ibn Rushd-Goethe Mosque against criticism from the Islamic world. In Berlin, Germany's Foreign Ministry, as well as the Interior Ministry, has rejected criticism leveled by the Turkish Religious Affairs Directorate, Diyanet, pointing to protection of religious freedom.

German Interior Ministry spokesman, Tobias Plate, said the issues of religious freedom and the Berlin mosque will be raised with counterparts from Ankara at their next bilateral meeting. Diyanet, a religious authority in Turkey, operates under the aegis of the country's prime minister.

The German government's promise to address the issue brings the debate over the new mosque to the highest political level. One week ago, Berlin attorney and women's rights activist, Seyran Ates, opened the liberal mosque. Situated in Berlin's Moabit neighborhood, it is housed within a local Protestant church and is open to men and women of every sexual orientation.

Ates herself is an imam and chooses not to wear a headscarf while carrying out her duties. That has caused anger in the Islamic world. She said she has been overwhelmed by a flood of hate mail and has also received death threats. Authorities said it remains to be seen if the house of worship will require police protection.

Diyanet has claimed the new mosque is connected to the Gulen

Movement operated by exiled Turkish cleric Fethullah Gulen, whom the Turkish government claimed was behind last July's failed coup attempt.

'A threat to social harmony'

Interior Ministry spokesman Plate called the Turkish criticism bewildering and "unacceptable."

"It cannot be ruled out that such statements have the potential to threaten social harmony within German society," he added.

According to media reports, Ankara has been aggressively pursuing and threatening alleged members of the Gulen movement, as well as institutions connected to it, such as schools – even in Germany.

The German Foreign and Interior ministries emphasized that their own criticism was not only directed at Diyanet, but also at the supreme authority on fatwas in Egypt. That authority sharply criticized the Berlin mosque for violating Islamic religious responsibilities.

'The state has to protect religious freedom'

Martin Schäfer, spokesman for the German Foreign Ministry, said such statements were, "clearly intended to deny people in Germany the right to exercise their religion and limit their right to freely express their opinion."

He went on to say that the German government summarily rejected any such attempts. "When, where and how people choose to express and live out their religious beliefs is not the government's business. Rather, the opposite is the case: It is our understanding that the state has no authority to interpret religious issues, but instead, has the responsibility to protect freedom of religion, just as it does freedom of speech and freedom of the press."

He went on to remind those present that Turkey is also a signatory of the European Convention on Human Rights, which guarantees religious liberty.

The liberal mosque's opening caused a great stir in Germany and has also received international attention. It is named after one of the most important figures of enlightened Islam, the Arab scholar, physician and philosopher Ibn Rushd (1126-1198), known as Averroes outside the Islamic world, as well as the German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), whose "West-Eastern Divan" is one of the most important German-language books ever written on the exchange of ideas between the Occident and the Orient.

Men and women will pray side by side at the new mosque, and women allowed to preach. The Quran will be interpreted in a "historically critical manner," and organizers say they do not welcome fully veiled women. Seyran Ates started the mosque initiative because she is convinced that the interpretation of Islam must not be left to religious conservatives.

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