# Prosecution over Qur'an burning reignites fears of blasphemy law in UK



The prosecution of Hamit Coskun, a man charged with burning a Qur'an outside the Turkish consulate in London, has sparked a heated legal debate regarding the implications for freedom of speech in the UK. During the ongoing trial, Coskun pleaded not guilty to a public order offence allegedly motivated by hostility towards Islam. His actions, which included shouting inflammatory statements such as “fuck Islam” and “Islam is a religion of terrorism,” raise significant questions about the boundaries of free expression and the potential for the reintroduction of blasphemy laws in Britain.

Defence barrister Katy Thorne KC argued that prosecuting Coskun is akin to re-establishing blasphemy statutes, which were abolished in England and Wales in 2008, and in Scotland by 2021. Thorne asserted that such a prosecution would equate to treating the Qur'an as a specially protected object, thereby criminalising criticism of Islam in a manner reminiscent of historical blasphemy laws. She emphasised that citizens must retain the right to express their beliefs—religious or secular—without fear of legal repercussions, advocating for the highest protection of freedom of speech in what she described as a political protest against Turkish government policies.

The implications extend beyond this case, as concerns have been raised by various commentators and politicians about the potential for de facto blasphemy laws to emerge from the backdoor. Senior MPs, including former Liberal Democrat leader Tim Farron, have cautioned that prosecuting actions like Coskun’s could inadvertently pave the way for broader restrictions on free speech, particularly surrounding religious critique. The discussion touches on vital societal values, highlighting the delicate balance between maintaining public order and upholding individual rights to dissent and protest.

Prosecutor Philip McGhee contested that Coskun was not being charged for burning the Qur'an per se but rather for disorderly conduct. He defended the prosecution, insisting Coskun's actions posed a clear threat to public order. McGhee’s arguments suggest a focus on the manner and context of the demonstration rather than its content, which introduces complexity into the dialogue about expression and authority.

The case has drawn the attention of the Free Speech Union and the National Secular Society, both of which advocate for the charges against Coskun to be dropped. They argue that continuing with the prosecution compromises the essence of free expression, emphasising that no individual should be coerced into adhering to the tenets of any religion through the law. Coskun himself expressed bewilderment at facing legal consequences in a country he believed to champion liberty, stating that experiencing such treatment in the UK was shocking.

As the trial progresses, the broader implications for civil liberties remain a focal point of analysis. The discussion surrounding Hamit Coskun’s case highlights the fraught intersection of free speech, religious sensitivity, and public order, raising fundamental questions about what limits, if any, should be placed on expressions that challenge prevailing social norms.

The prosecution's decision and the court’s upcoming ruling could set a precedent that may influence how similar cases are handled in the future, potentially reshaping the landscape of free speech in a multicultural society. While the examination of Coskun's actions is ongoing, the legal and social ramifications of this trial will undoubtedly resonate well beyond the courtroom.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/may/28/prosecuting-man-for-burning-quran-reintroducing-blasphemy-law-court-told), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/may/28/prosecuting-man-for-burning-quran-reintroducing-blasphemy-law-court-told)
* Paragraph 2 – [[3]](https://www.thejc.com/news/politics/quran-burner-blasphemy-laws-cnhlk1n7), [[5]](https://www.lawgazette.co.uk/news/quran-burning-case-threatens-back-door-blasphemy-law/5122978.article)
* Paragraph 3 – [[4]](https://www.breitbart.com/europe/2025/05/10/uk-prosecutor-backtracks-after-attempting-to-charge-quran-burner-with-blasphemy-law-that-doesnt-exist/), [[7]](https://freespeechunion.org/cps-bringing-back-blasphemy-by-prosecuting-man-for-burning-qaran/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[6]](https://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2025/04/quran-burning-charge-evokes-blasphemy-offence-legal-expert-says)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/may/28/prosecuting-man-for-burning-quran-reintroducing-blasphemy-law-court-told> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/may/28/prosecuting-man-for-burning-quran-reintroducing-blasphemy-law-court-told> - An article from The Guardian reports on the trial of Hamit Coskun, who was charged with a religiously aggravated public order offence after burning a Qur'an outside the Turkish consulate in London. His defence argues that prosecuting him is akin to reintroducing a blasphemy law in Great Britain, a law that was abolished in England and Wales in 2008 and in Scotland in 2021. The case raises significant concerns about freedom of speech and the potential for blasphemy laws to be reinstated through legal backdoors.
3. <https://www.thejc.com/news/politics/quran-burner-blasphemy-laws-cnhlk1n7> - The Jewish Chronicle discusses the concerns of senior MPs, including former Liberal Democrat leader Tim Farron, regarding the decision to charge Hamit Coskun for burning the Qur'an outside the Turkish consulate in London. They warn that such actions could lead to the imposition of 'de facto blasphemy laws' in the UK, potentially infringing on freedom of speech and expression.
4. <https://www.breitbart.com/europe/2025/05/10/uk-prosecutor-backtracks-after-attempting-to-charge-quran-burner-with-blasphemy-law-that-doesnt-exist/> - Breitbart reports on the Crown Prosecution Service's (CPS) decision to amend charges against Hamit Coskun after backlash over the attempted application of a non-existent blasphemy law. Initially charged with causing harassment, alarm, or distress to the 'religious institution of Islam,' the CPS revised the charge to more accurately reflect the alleged offence, following criticism that the original charge was legally flawed and akin to reintroducing blasphemy laws.
5. <https://www.lawgazette.co.uk/news/quran-burning-case-threatens-back-door-blasphemy-law/5122978.article> - The Law Society Gazette highlights concerns from the National Secular Society and legal experts about the prosecution of Hamit Coskun for burning the Qur'an. They argue that the case could lead to the backdoor reinstatement of blasphemy laws in England and Wales, a development that could have significant implications for freedom of speech and expression.
6. <https://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2025/04/quran-burning-charge-evokes-blasphemy-offence-legal-expert-says> - The National Secular Society reports on a legal opinion stating that the charge against Hamit Coskun for burning the Qur'an evokes the notion of blasphemy. The opinion suggests that the charge is 'plainly defective' and that convicting Coskun could amount to criminalising the desecration of a religious text in a public place, potentially leading to the reinstatement of blasphemy laws by the back door.
7. <https://freespeechunion.org/cps-bringing-back-blasphemy-by-prosecuting-man-for-burning-qaran/> - The Free Speech Union discusses the CPS's prosecution of Hamit Coskun for burning the Qur'an, arguing that it represents an attempt to resurrect blasphemy laws in the UK. They highlight concerns that such actions could infringe on freedom of speech and expression, and call for the charges to be dropped to prevent the backdoor reinstatement of blasphemy laws.