

International

Athens Muslims fear mosque delay after Hagia conversion

Turkey turns Istanbul's Hagia Sophia museum back to a mosque

ATHENS: After Turkey turned Istanbul's Hagia Sophia museum back to a mosque, Muslims in Athens fear their own official place of worship, delayed for over a decade, will be held back again. The project to open a state-sanctioned mosque in Athens, the only European capital that does not have one, was launched in 2007. But it immediately ran into strong opposition from the influential Orthodox Church, as well as from nationalist groups.

"I think after this incident, it might be even more difficult to open the official mosque that we have awaited for ten years," says Imam Atta-ul Naseer, who runs a makeshift mosque in a central Athens apartment. An architectural marvel of the 6th century, the Hagia Sophia Byzantine basilica was converted into a mosque in 1453 after the capture of Constantinople by the Ottomans. In 1934, the founder of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, turned the monument into a museum as a symbol of secular Turkey. But in July, a top Turkey court ruled that Hagia Sophia could be reconverted into a mosque.

'A mosque is a mosque'

"I think a mosque should remain a mosque. It should not become a church or whatever. Just as Christians expect Hagia Sophia to remain a church, Muslims expect the same," says Imam Naseer. The official mosque in Athens, without a minaret and under the supervision of the Greek state, is expected to open by the end of autumn in the industrial district of Elaionas, northeast of Athens. But

in the meantime, to meet the requirements of a Muslim community of nearly 300,000 people, numerous makeshift mosques, in apartments, basements and even sheds, have been created in past years.

Naseer believes that historic Ottoman mosques in Athens, like the one on the central Monastiraki square which has been transformed into a museum, could have served as a place of worship for Muslims. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has himself proposed this to Greek leaders in the past. But the subject is delicate in a country which was occupied by the Ottoman Empire for centuries, before regaining its independence in the 19th century.

Anti-Turkish sentiment

In Greece, anti-Turkish sentiment remains strong and the current tension between the two countries over migration and energy exploration in the eastern Mediterranean reinforces this animosity. "In Greek hearts, the Muslim is still associated with the Turkish invader", notes Naseer.

Living in Greece for the past seven years, the Pakistan-born imam has faced racism and sometimes even violence by neo-Nazi militants. "But in general, Christians and Muslims live together peacefully," he says. In an attempt to regulate the makeshift mosques, the Greek state sets strict operational rules. Operators must register the name of the religious representative and his background, the number of regular worshippers and the establishment's sources of income.

This triggered religious riots that killed 2,000 people, most of them Muslims. A lengthy legal battle ensued, but in November India's top court awarded the site to Hindus, allowing a temple "touching the sky" to be built on top of the ruined mosque. Wednesday's elaborate religious ceremony, involving priests in saffron masks, bricks made of silver and 135 living saints, was broadcast live on television. Images that appeared to show how the temple would look like when completed were displayed in New York's Times Square.

Crackers and dancing

Small celebrations took place across India including in Pune where people danced around a Ram statue and in Amritsar where Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) youth members burned crackers. Modi, 69, sharing a stage with the head of the RSS militaristic hardline Hindu group, compared the building of the temple to India's struggle for independence from Britain. "Just as 15 August (Independence Day) symbolises the untiring tenacity, millions of sacrifices and the fervent desire for freedom... similarly this day reminds of the sacrifice made by several generations... for the Ram temple," he said.

"A wait that lasted centuries is ending today. Golden history has been scripted." Modi's biographer, Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, told AFP earlier that the premier was looking to "make his position permanently in history" on the strength of this temple. Further cementing his place in the country's annals is his action on Kashmir, divided between India and Pakistan since 1947 and the spark of two wars and much bloodshed. The BJP had long seen the special status enjoyed by the part of Kashmir controlled by India as a historical wrong, and on August 5 last year, Modi abolished it.—AFP



ATHENS: Muslims who live in Greece, wear protective face masks as they pray at a mosque in Athens. After Turkey turned Istanbul's iconic Hagia Sophia museum back to a mosque, Muslims in Athens fear their own official place of worship, delayed for over a decade, will be held back again. — AFP

The prayer hall must also meet safety standards, which include having a fire alarm, sanitary facilities and an emergency exit. "The procedures are complicated and take time. Few mosques have obtained permits from the ministry," Naseer says. In the Pakistani quarter of Athens, a green door stands out in a shopping lane: the entrance to the Al Jabbar Mosque. Bangladeshi Imam Abu Bakr proudly points to the coveted ministry document, pasted on a wall.

"Since 2017, we have been operating legally,"

he says. "The official mosque that the Greek state wants to open is far from the centre of Athens where many Muslim refugees live and can only accommodate 350 people anyway." "Unofficial mosques that become legal, like ours, will therefore remain necessary to Muslims who wish to practice their faith in Athens," Abu Bakr notes. The only mosques dating from the Ottoman era that are currently operating in Greece are located in the border region with Turkey, in Thrace, where a Turkish minority of 150,000 people live. —AFP

Modi writes 'golden history' - launching Hindu temple

AYODHYA: Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said "golden history" was written Wednesday as he launched construction of a new Hindu temple at a flashpoint religious site that has sparked some of the country's bloodiest sectarian violence. The colorful ceremony in Ayodhya, with Modi surrounded by saffron-clad priests, came on the first anniversary of the removal of the special status enjoyed by divided Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority region.

For his Hindu nationalist supporters, both steps confirm Modi as a decisive, visionary and heroic leader - and India's most important in decades. His critics see him as remoulding the officially secular country of 1.3 billion as a Hindu nation at the expense of India's 200 million Muslims, and taking it in an authoritarian direction.

"Modi has certainly been India's most transformative leader in recent memory," Michael Kugelman, from the Wilson Center, told AFP, making him "wildly popular, but also highly controversial and quite divisive". The holy city of Ayodhya in northern India has long been a religious tinderbox, providing the spark for some of its worst sectarian violence. In 1992, a Hindu mob destroyed a centuries-old mosque there that they believed had been built on the birthplace of Ram, an important deity.

Egypt investigates alleged gang rape at luxury hotel

CAIRO: Egypt's public prosecutor said Wednesday it has ordered an investigation into a gang rape allegation at a luxury hotel in Cairo in 2014 that surfaced on social media last month. "The Public Prosecution received a letter from the National Council for Women, accompanied by a complaint filed by one of the women who endured sexual abuse by several people at the Fairmont Nile City Hotel in Cairo in 2014," the public prosecutor said in Wednesday's statement. Attached to the complaint lodged Tuesday "were testimonies from people with knowledge about the incident," the prosecutor added. Results of the investigations will be announced "in due time," the statement said.

The alleged assault, which took place at a five-star Cairo hotel, involved a group of six men said to have drugged and raped a young woman, according to social media accounts. Names and pictures of the accused, who hail from wealthy families, have circulated widely online but AFP has been unable to verify their authenticity. Egypt's National Council for Women condemned retaliatory threats made against women exposing sexual misconduct last week. The council "stands by every woman and girl exposed to any... threat by providing all necessary support", it said.—AFP