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# Liberal mosque founder who banned burqas defies death threats and vows to continue

‘It is very important to have freedom of conscience and freedom of expression without being subjected to abuse and violence,’ says Seyran Ates

Kim Sengupta Diplomatic Editor | Wednesday 26 July 2017 14:15 BST |  219 comments

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The trainee imam wants to promote tolerance and dialogue

**Seyran Ates** has been beaten up in the street, received death threats and had fatwas issued against her since she opened her **mosque in Berlin where men and women can pray together** and explore a liberal version of Islam.

But the Turkish born lawyer and human rights campaigner has stuck to her beliefs and she is now in Britain to promote a campaign for tolerance and dialogue and fight aggressive extremism in religion and politics. She will, in the course of this, meet Muslim imams and community leaders and seek to help set up mosques where worshippers are not segregated by their gender.

“There will, I fully appreciate, be people who oppose what we are saying and doing. But there are others who also feel the same way we do in the UK, as there are elsewhere, and this is a chance to discuss what can be done,” she says. “We believe that in a democratic society it is very important to have freedom of conscience and freedom of expression without being subjected to abuse and violence. Anyone has the right to pray at our mosque, men and women, people who are LGBT, of whatever race. Surely it is vital to protect these rights.”



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It is perhaps unsurprising that the views of 54-year-old Ates has led to a backlash from conservative clerics. They held that what is being practised at the Ibn Rushd-Goethe mosque – named after the Andalusian Muslim polymath who became an acclaimed scholar of Greek philosophy and the great German writer who had a deep interest in eastern writing – was sacrilegious.

In **Egypt**, the state-run religious institution Dar al-Ifta al-Misriyyah, declared that Islam does not allow men and women to pray together and the Al-Azhar University's jurisprudence department issued a fatwa. The main religious authority in Turkey, Diyanet, attacked what was being practised at the mosque as "nothing more than depraving and ruining religion." A religious institution in Hamburg has also joined in the denunciation.

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There has been vitriol in the social media directed towards Ates with some of the abusers incensed that, on top of everything else, she is training to be an imam. After the assault on her and warnings that she will be killed, she now receives police protection. She says she was sad that these measures had to be taken, but "people often react with anger when their right to oppress is challenged". She has, in the past, been attacked by the husband of an abused wife, narrowly escaping a shooting.

"As far as the mosque is concerned, there are insults and threats, but I am also getting 300 emails a day from people who support us and urge us to continue. We have got support from all over the world, from Algeria to Australia, from the US and Canada. We

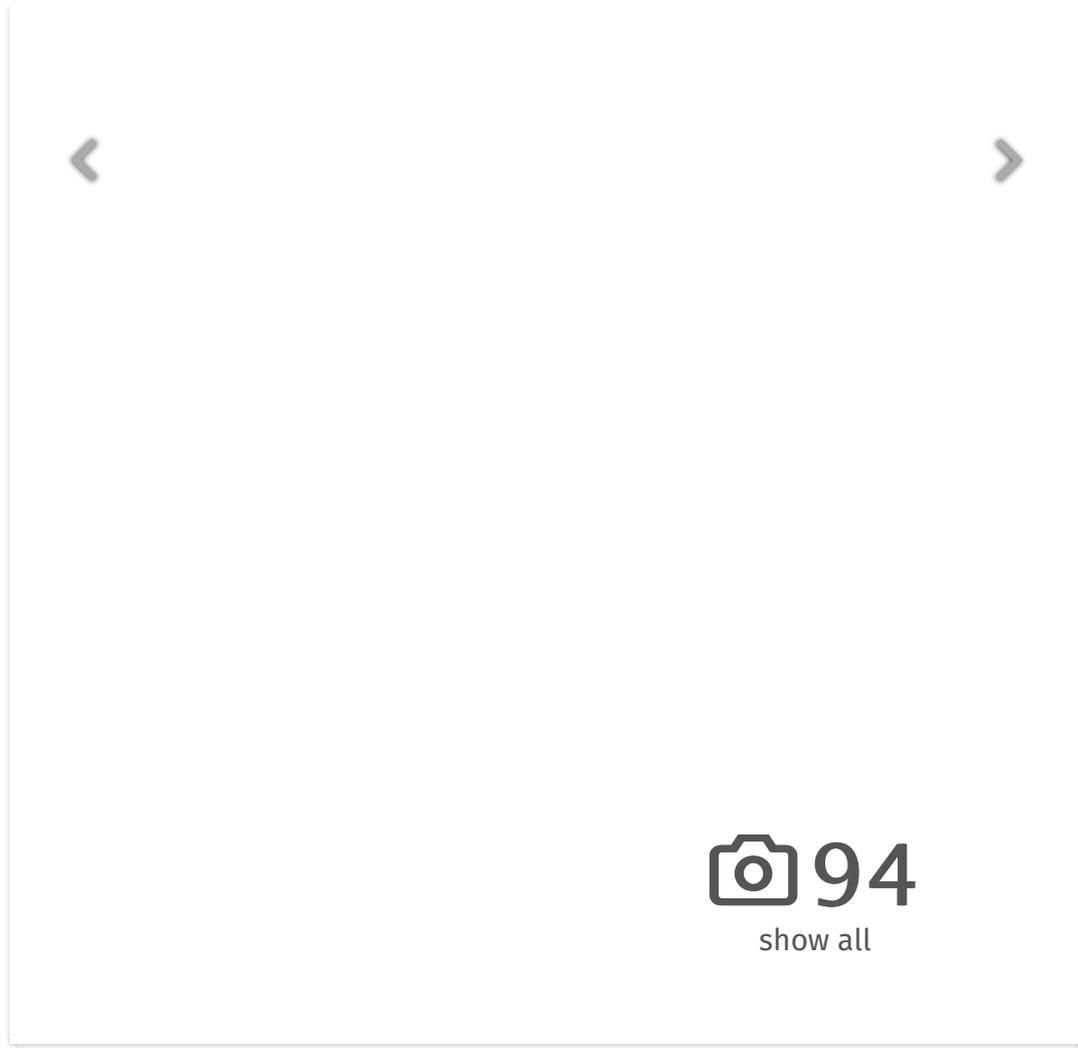
get donations sent in. And it is not just Muslims but other religions, and some who are atheists but support our right to pray to God the way we want,” says Ates. “It is this encouragement which made me think that I should be involved in fighting for the rights of other people and against those who want to suppress those rights.”

Ates, who has won a number of human rights awards, is part of a campaign called Stop Extremism, calling for fundamental rights of EU citizens to be protected from extremism. A petition with a million signatures backing the measure would enable Brussels to consider making it a directive with the possibility of it coming into laws of member states. The target is to get 100,000 signatures in the UK. The campaigners hold that there is no reason why this cannot be enshrined into domestic law even after this country leaves the bloc.

Sebastian Reimer, a law and communications specialist from Austria who has accompanied Ates in the UK visit, wants to stress: “What we are proposing is against all forms of extremism, not just Islamic extremists. It is aimed at extreme right-wing groups, racists including those who target Muslims and anti-Semites.

“We are proposing that this includes a range of issues: extremist acts, funding of extremists, including from abroad, and also oppression of individuals in society such as that of a wife by her husband, for instance, because women are very often victims of this form of intolerance. There is, we think, a reaction against extremism in Europe and we believe there is a lot of support for this move.”

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**Angela Merkel** and members of her cabinet stood by Ates in Germany, resisting calls for the Ibn Rushd-Goethe mosque to be shut down. The **Erdogan government in Turkey**, among other things, accused it of being linked with Fethullah Gulen, the exiled cleric blamed for last year's failed coup.

In Britain, too, she has received backing from a number of public figures engaged in the civil rights and counter-extremism field. Lord Carlile QC, the former independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, has said: "I support her efforts and applaud her courageous initiative".

Lord Pannick QC, one of the leading experts in public and human rights law in this country, has stated: "Seyran Ates certainly has my support and support of all who believe in freedom of religion. It is sad that those who take advantage of

freedom of religion for themselves are reluctant to grant it to others.” For Lord Patel of Bradford, “Seyran Ates’s push for inclusivity and freedom of choice in worship is to be applauded.”

Ates says: “There is certainly a great opportunity for what we are trying to do in the UK. I personally think some mistakes were made here, such as allowing sharia courts to establish themselves. However one tries to hide the fact, they are bad for women. But we are very open to talking with conservative Muslims. Surely they too must be worried that violent people, terrorists are trying to hijack Islam? Surely they too would want to show that Islam is a peaceful, spiritual and beautiful religion?”

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