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TURKMENISTAN: More than half Ashgabad's mosques now destroyed

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

In early April, Aksa Mosque in Turkmenistan's capital Ashgabad became the eighth of the city's mosques to have been summarily destroyed in the city in recent years. The Mosque – built in the early 1990s with donations from local Muslims – could accommodate 100 worshippers. Demolition workers from the Hyakimlik (administration) justified the demolition by telling local people that "this mosque has been built without any kind of permission", Radio Free Europe's Turkmen Service noted. No one over 23 years had mentioned any illegality in the construction, insisted a 70-year-old local resident who had been involved in the Mosque's original construction. "But now, under a pretext, they are destroying the building considered to be God's house," Iolaman-aga told Radio Free Europe. An official of the Architecture Department of Ashgabad's Kopetdag District Hyakimlik put the phone down before Forum 18 News Service could ask about the destroyed Aksa Mosque. The demolition was completed as Turkmenistan's new Religion Law entered into force on 12 April.

Turkmenistan's new Religion Law entered into force on 12 April, as the authorities in the capital Ashgabad [Ashgabat] finished bulldozing another of the city's mosques, Forum 18 News Service notes. The authorities claimed that Aksa Mosque in the city's Kopetdag District had been built 23 years ago without proper permission, Radio Free Europe's Turkmen Service said. This is the eighth of 14 mosques known to have been demolished in recent years in and around the capital, where Christian churches have also been bulldozed or confiscated in the past 20 years.

Forum 18 reached the Architecture Department of Kopetdag District Hyakimlik (Administration) on 14 April, but the official put the phone down before Forum 18 could ask about the destroyed Aksa Mosque. Subsequent calls went unanswered. Telephones at Ashgabad Hyakimlik's Architecture and Town-Planning Department went unanswered the same day.

The state appears to have held no prior public consultations on the demolitions, nor offered any compensation for any of these places of worship destroyed in city redevelopment projects or simply confiscated. An Ashgabad resident had warned in November 2015 that Aksa Mosque was under threat, as well as Hoja Ahmet Yasavi Mosque near Ashgabad's main stadium in the west of the city. Hoja Ahmet Yasavi Mosque still functions, Forum 18 notes (see below).

Six of the Ashgabad mosques demolished in recent years have – like the Aksa Mosque – been Sunni Muslim. The other two catered to Shia Muslims.

Detentions, fines, imprisonment, torture

In two separate incidents in February, state officials moved to stop Protestants exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief. Officers of the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police warned Baptist leaders in the town of Mary not to hold a children's summer camp in 2016, otherwise "it would be a different conversation". In the town of Tejen, drugs officers seized Greater Grace church members offering religious literature. Church members were later fined (see F18News 18 April 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2169).

Meanwhile, Jehovah's Witnesses have expressed disappointment that prisoner of conscience Bahram Hemdemov was not included in the prisoner amnesty declared in February. Police arrested Hemdemov during a March 2015 raid on his home, following which they tortured him. He is serving a four year prison term on charges of inciting religious hatred. All Hemdemov's attempts to overturn his sentence on appeal have failed (see F18News 5 April 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2164).

In March and October 2015 the United Nations Human Rights Committee found that Turkmenistan had violated the rights of four young men by imprisoning them for refusing compulsory religious service on grounds of religious conscience. The Committee also ruled that beatings and other maltreatment of Zafar Abdullayev, Mahmud Hudaybergenov, Ahmet Hudaybergenov and Sunnet Japparov represented torture. Turkmenistan has failed to recompense these victims of human rights violations or change laws and procedures to prevent such violations recurring (see F18News 5 April 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2164).

New Religion Law retains ban on unregistered religious activity

The mosque demolition, threats and punishments come as Turkmenistan has once more changed its Religion Law. The new Law retains the earlier ban on unregistered religious activity, while increasing the number of founders who can apply for legal status for a religious community from five to 50.

The new Law was announced by President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov on 12 January, approved in the Mejlis (parliament) on 26 March and came into force on 12 April, the day of its publication on the government website. The text of the new Law does not appear to have been made public in advance and no public discussion of any draft took place (see F18News 18 April 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2169).

A presidential decree of 19 February 2015 (followed by amendments to the Religion Law later in 2015) abolished the Gengesh (Council) for Religious Affairs, together with the dual role that regional imams had in implementing state policy on religion (see F18News 13 October 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1361).

The new state body established in 2015 to control religious activity - the Commission for Work with Religious Organisations, subject to the Cabinet of Ministers – is headed by Turkmenistan's former imam Mekan Akyev.

Mosque demolished

The authorities moved to demolish Aksa Mosque in Ashgabad's Kopetdag District in early April, Radio Free Europe noted. By 12 April only the 25-metre minaret was still standing. Eyewitnesses told the radio station that unlike with other similar demolitions, where buildings were dismantled brick by brick to be able to reuse building materials, the mosque was destroyed quickly with a bulldozer.

Aksa Mosque – which could accommodate about 100 worshippers - was built in the early 1990s with donations from local Sunni Muslims, many of them from the Nohur community. It was also known popularly as the Nohur Mosque – the Nohurs are a tribe living in the Kopetdag mountains close to Turkmenistan's southern border with Iran who retain a traditional way of life.

Demolition workers from the Hyakimlik justified the demolition by telling local people that "this mosque has been built without any kind of permission", Radio Free Europe noted.

"For the past 23 years, no one even made mention of the illegality of the Mosque's construction," 70-year-old local resident Iolaman-aga, who had been involved in the Mosque's original construction, was quoted as declaring. "But now, under a pretext, they are destroying the building considered to be God's house."

Iolaman-aga added that local people managed to take the religious books, prayer rugs and air conditioners to other Mosques. Furniture was thrown away with the other debris.

Demolition workers told local people that a decision had been taken not to destroy the minaret, but to use the bulldozer to dig underneath it to be able to bring it onto its side whole.

Eighth of 14 Ashgabad Mosques demolished

The demolition of Aksa Mosque brought to eight the number of Mosques in and around Ashgabad known to have been demolished in recent years.

Mosque demolition has been underway since the country gained independence in 1991, Ashgabad-based dramatist Amanmurad Bugayev told Radio Free Europe on 13 November 2015. The first to be demolished was Hezret Omar Mosque in Gazha district in western Ashgabad, closely followed by Imam Reza Mosque, which catered to Shia Muslims. Next to be demolished was another Shia Mosque, Hezreti Ali Mosque, about 4 kilometres (2 miles) from Ashgabad on the main road south to the Iranian border.

Later Imam Agzyn Mosque (near the newly-demolished Aksa Mosque) was also demolished. Gurbanmuhammed Ahun Mosque in the village of Ilerki Garadamak near Ashgabad was then destroyed, as was Abadan Mosque in the village of Gayraki Garadamak on the edge of Ashgabad. When Choganli – a dacha settlement north of Ashgabad airport - was demolished in the first half of 2015, the Mosque in the centre was among the buildings destroyed.

Bugayev insisted that the Mosques had all been in good condition and appropriate for religious use. He complained that the loss of these Mosques means that local people wishing to pray the namaz or conduct other Muslim rituals need to travel some distance to the remaining open Mosques, such as Ertogrul gazy (Turkish) Mosque in central Ashgabad. However, although this Mosque is large, not all wishing to pray there can get inside during Friday prayers, Bugayev pointed out. Many have to pray in the yard around the Mosque.

Speaking in November 2015, Bugayev warned that Aksa Mosque was under threat, as was Hoja Ahmet Yasavi Mosque. While Aksa Mosque has now been destroyed, Hoja Ahmet Yasavi Mosque still functions, Ashgabad residents told Forum 18 on 13 April.

Long history of destruction of places of worship

Ashgabad has undergone massive reconstruction in the past two decades. When city districts are summarily demolished, with no public consultation and often little notice, no compensation is generally offered to those losing their homes or livelihoods.

Among places of worship bulldozed in Ashgabad was the Seventh-day Adventist church, built in the 1990s and which was destroyed in 1999 at only one week's notice. The authorities claimed the land was needed for a road-widening programme, but for some years the site was derelict. The Adventists have never been given any compensation and are not allowed to build a new church to replace the one destroyed.

Shortly before Ashgabad's Adventist Church was demolished, in August 1999 a Hare Krishna temple outside the eastern town of Mary was demolished.

A mosque was among buildings in an entire settlement, Darvasa in the central Kara-Kum desert, which was destroyed in autumn 2004 after then President Saparmurat Niyazov flew over in a helicopter and regarded the settlement as unattractive. Darvasa's mainly ethnic Uzbek residents were given just two hours to leave. One visitor to the settlement before its destruction told Forum 18 that the mosque had only just been completed when it was destroyed.

Other mosques in Turkmenistan have also been destroyed, apparently in some cases for failure to honour then President Niyazov's books of alleged "spiritual writings" (see F18News 4 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=481 and 19 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=187).

A family-owned Sunni Muslim mosque in the Caspian port city of Turkmenbashi [Turkmenbasy, formerly Krasnovodsk] was destroyed in July 2005, while what remained of the long-closed Armenian Apostolic Church in the city was partially destroyed (see F18News 23 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=786).

President Berdymukhamedov's November 2012 promise to return what remains of the Armenian Church and allow it to be restored and reopened for worship have never been fulfilled (see F18News 23 May 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1840).

Ashgabad's Baptist Church and the Pentecostal Church both lost their places of worship – former homes which had been turned into churches in the Soviet period – in April 2001. Both were summarily seized with no compensation.

Building Mosques = exclusively the President's job?

While officials often destroy places of worship, building or regaining places of worship is all but impossible. New Mosques appear to be built only on orders of the President. When such new Mosques are built, President Berdymukhamedov often attends the ceremonial opening amid massive official publicity, as happened when the new Mosque was opened in the northern city of Dashoguz on 30 October 2015. Turkmenistan's Chief Mufti, as well as all the Regional Muftis, were required to be present.

Officials have never explained why the President can order places of worship to be built but other individuals – and religious communities themselves - do not have this possibility.

"Requests for the return of churches remain unanswered"

Although the Russian Orthodox Church has been allowed to maintain and, occasionally, build new churches in the past two decades, it has not been able to regain all the churches confiscated during the Soviet period.

"Unfortunately, representatives of the Patriarchal deanery [in Turkmenistan] have not been able up to today to reach an understanding with state bodies on all questions connected with the dispensation of church life," Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill told the Bishops' Council in Moscow on 2 February 2015 in remarks quoted on the Patriarchate website. "In this connection, requests for the return of churches remain unanswered."

Patriarch Kirill did not identify the location of the churches whose return the Orthodox have requested.

Patriarch Kirill said in 2011 that discussions were underway between church leaders and Turkmen government officials over building new Resurrection Cathedral in Ashgabad, as promised by then President Niyazov in the 1990s. The site allocated by the President was later built on.

However, in March 2011 Bayram Samuradov, the then chief architect of Ashgabad, told Forum 18 that a provisional site in the

Parahat suburb in the south of the city had been earmarked as the new location for the cathedral (see F18News 11 March 2011 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1551). However, the new cathedral appears no closer to being built. (END)

For a personal commentary by a Protestant within Turkmenistan, on the fiction - despite government claims - of religious freedom in the country, and how religious communities and the international community should respond to this, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=728.

For a personal commentary by another Turkmen Protestant, arguing that "without freedom to meet for worship it is impossible to claim that we have freedom of religion or belief," see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1128.

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Turkmenistan can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=32>.

For more background information see Forum 18's religious freedom survey of Turkmenistan at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1676.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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