

# Greece's first state-sponsored mosque may open in September

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ATHENS: Greece's education and religion minister says the country's long-delayed first state-sponsored mosque is likely to begin operating in September, about three years after its construction was approved by parliament.

Kostas Gavroglou spoke on Friday during a visit to the nearly complete mosque on the outskirts of Athens' city centre, accompanied by representatives of the Muslim community. Its construction has been controversial, with some opposing a mosque in the Greek capital.

"It is particularly good that soon there will be the first prayer from the imam of the Athens mosque. We hope this will happen in September at the latest," Gavroglou said.

The mosque, approved by lawmakers in August 2016 and built in a mainly industrial area of the capital, will provide an official place of worship for the country's Muslim immigrant community and for visitors. Tens of thousands of Muslim migrants live in the greater Athens area, and have been using informal prayer rooms in basements and disused stores.

Gavroglou noted the Athens mosque, unlike most in Europe, was a public and not a privately-owned place of worship.

"It doesn't belong to anyone, because it belongs to all of us and all of you," he said. "Here, the owner is not an individual, nor a community, nor a society nor a foreign country."

The near completion of the project has been greeted with relief by members of the capital's Muslim community. "I would like to start by thanking Allah that we finally have a mosque where we can pray, we can gather, we can talk about our matters," said Zaki Mohamed, the mosque's imam.

Ashir Haidar, a representative of the Shia community in Greece, described the upcoming opening as "a dream come true". "It is a great gift from the Greek state to the Muslim community of Athens."

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