

RELIGION IN SOCIETY

THE MOSQUE IN POST-SOVIET CENTRAL ASIA: SACRAL AND SPIRITUAL CONTEXTS

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37178/ca-c.20.3.09>

Myrzakhmet ZHUZEY

*Ph.D. student, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University
(Almaty, Kazakhstan)*

Nataliya SEITAKHMETOVA

*D.Sc. (Philos.), Professor, Corresponding Member of
the RK National Academy of Sciences, Lead Researcher, Institute of Philosophy,
Political and Religious Studies, Committee for Science,
Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan
(Almaty, Kazakhstan)*

Madina BEKTENOVA

*Ph.D., Lead Researcher, Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Research
under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan
(Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan)*

Sholpan ZHANDOSSOVA

*Ph.D., Associated Professor, Head of the Religious Studies Department,
Institute of Philosophy, Political and Religious Studies, Committee for Science,
Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan
(Almaty, Kazakhstan)*

A B S T R A C T

The article examines the role of the mosque as a sacred and spiritual component of the formation and development of independent Central Asian states, an element of nation-building and an architectural image in a secular environment. The actualization of religious processes in society, the increasing number of religious buildings and places of worship, the number of believers and, in general, religious content in the public consciousness, led to a heightened interest in the study of socio-religious

practices and relations between the state and confessions. The subject of Islam, which is a traditional religion for many Kazakhstanis, is discussed both from a theological and religious stance, as well as a factor of geopolitical influence and a component of today's political and socio-cultural discussions. The mosque has historically been an integral part of Islam. The authors consider issues related to the definition of the role and place of the mosque in the life of Kazakhstani society and in the process of spiritual revival.

KEYWORDS: *mosque, post-Soviet space, secularity, mosque-related discourse and narratives, religious consciousness, national revival, religious identity.*

Introduction

The relevance of the topic selected is justified by the fact that the mosque has not been exhaustively studied. An analysis of the scientific elaboration of the issue demonstrates a very small number of research works based on the study of the mosque phenomenon as a distinct issue. In general, scientific works devoted to the study of the mosque can be divided into three main types: first and foremost, studies of the architectural and cultural features of the mosque in the framework of urban anthropology, urban planning, architecture, monumental and decorative art, secondly, studies of sociological and empirical indicators of religiosity of the population, religious identification through the prism of attendance, implementation of religious practices, social activity, and thirdly, religious studies of the mosque as a sacred, spiritual and educational center, the focal point of the popularization of Islamic values.

The idea that, despite the apparent and actively promoted dominance of atheistic practices, in reality the union of Soviet and traditional institutions existed at the formal “upper” level became central in reconstructing the transition from Soviet to post-Soviet practices in everyday religious life. Real everyday relations and traditions that were important for people of Muslim culture were preserved in the depths of national cultural practices. This hidden, latent level of religious sentiment became the basis for the revival and actualization of Islamic practices and places of worship in the post-Soviet period, but it was not the sole reason behind what is now called the Islamic revival in the specialized literature.

The issues of restoring and rethinking the places of mass religious practice gained relevance along with the collapse of the Soviet Union, in the search for a spiritual beginning and religious identity. This was especially evident with regard to Islam and the Muslim peoples of Central Asia and the CIS countries. An active process of construction and restoration of various types of Muslim places of worship began—from mosques, madrasahs, Islamic cultural centers to sacred objects, i.e., mazars. Following the political transformations, the mass media assumed a different tone when describing

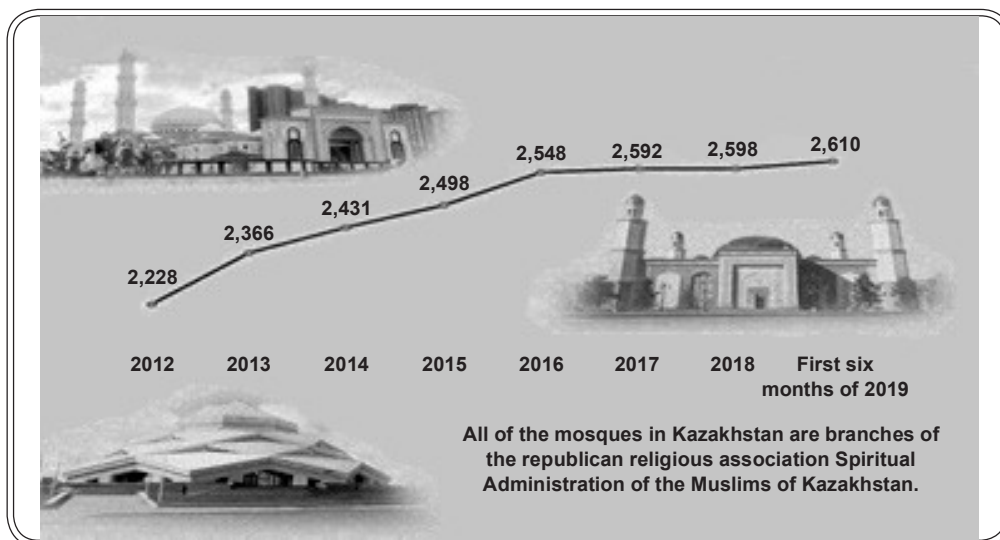
mosques; along with other objects of a religious nature, they were no longer perceived as traces of the past. The minarets began to be seen as the majestic dominants of the city, the presence of religious sites no longer embarrassed city planners, on the contrary, they began to pay attention to them as special tools for cities to endow their search for identity with special expressiveness.

The number of mosques built is measured not by dozens, but by hundreds and even thousands in the new conditions of post-Soviet urban development, despite the eclecticism and a mixture of architectural and stylistic solutions.

While there were only 25 mosques in Kazakhstan during the Soviet period, there were as many as 2,229 religious institutions of Islam in 2012 according to official data (after the re-registration of religious institutions), and in 2019 their number increased to 2,610¹ (see Fig. 1).²

Figure 1

Dynamics of Growth of the Number of Mosques in Kazakhstan (2012-2019)



Along with the political and social transformation processes, Islam has actually regained its political significance in many post-Soviet states. It is becoming increasingly more nationalized. In this regard, the study of Islam is important not only as a theological doctrine, but also through the prism of everyday practices in which it is actualized, as well as for understanding the key modern social trends.

Accordingly, the symbolic capital of the mosque as the main Islamic religious and cultural focal point in the post-Soviet space is loaded with new dominants that shape the meaning and correlate with the national discourse, the construction of identity and cultural heritage of peoples.

The search for and reconstruction of the national identity codes, which accompanied the democratization process in post-Soviet countries, often led to the renaissance of the symbolism and axiology of those religious traditions that were persistently pushed into the background during the Soviet

¹ See website of the Ministry of Information and Social Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan, available at [<http://qogam.gov.kz/ru/kategorii/religioznaya-sfera>], 15 August, 2019.

² See: “Dinamika rosta kolichstva mechetey v Kazakhstane,” available at [<https://kazislam.kz/қазақстандағы-мешіт-санының-өсу-дина/?lang=ru>], 4 October, 2019.

period. In addition, democratization of post-Soviet countries has sparked dynamic discussions about the observance of the right to freedom of religion, and as a result, about the recognition of religious diversity. Thus, the role of the mosque was amplified: it has transformed from a place of worship to a special religious and social institution, with an emphasis on rallying co-religionists, enlightenment, integration and orientation of the ummah (Muslim community).

Research Methodology

The object of research is the changing role of the mosque in the socio-cultural space of the independent Central Asian states.

The multifunctionality and multifaceted nature of the mosque in national culture and religious practice, actualized in the architectural and construction projects of the post-Soviet period, provide an opportunity for a comprehensive analysis and interdisciplinary interpretation of the mosque phenomenon. Today, the scientific community needs to develop theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of the mosque's role in the social, cultural and political narratives of the post-Soviet period.

The methodology for studying the phenomenon of the mosque at the modern stages of development of scientific thought allows for a wide application of methods ranging from architectural and art history to theological interpretations of Islamic science. This study utilizes methods of historical and cultural reconstruction, the systemic holistic analysis method, the method of critical research and generalization of existing source material, methods of phenomenological interpretation, field research methods, including participatory observation and visual analysis.

The study of the mosque in the post-secular period takes on an interdisciplinary, cross-cultural character, which is justified by its symbolic capital.

Mosque-Related Discourse and Narratives

The question of what a mosque is a question of a deep ontological understanding of the phenomenon, de-objectified as the House of God, where a person finds moral and spiritual meaning, peace and understanding of the purpose of his life.

The mosque was given special attention in the life and culture of Muslims. In the world of Islam, where religion embodied not only purely cult principles, but also the ethical and moral code of a society, where it pushed aside and took control of secular institutions, the mosque assumed the role of a key social and cultural center with many functions. The functions were communicative, whereby communication between a person and God is carried out; educational, which reveals the meaning of the Holy Scriptures, hadiths, rituals, Islamic holidays, the meaning of the Quranic truths for the daily life of a person, exalting it to high spiritual forms; and sacral, whereby a person is exalted by communion with God, whereby through prayer and communication with other people, with the imam, one comprehends the essence of the Islamic faith in an educational context. Since ancient times, the large mosque courtyard was a place for public meetings, it served as a place for debates, communication between rulers and people. In addition, mosques provided a place for social needs such as education, fellowship, and refuge for the traveler and the poor.

In our opinion, the symbolization of the mosque as a cult architectural entity that fills the environment with itself and with its meaning is one of the fundamental mosque-related discourses. The environment is often urban, since Islam had developed in cities. Cathedral mosques are large city

mosques, which are located in the city center and, according to the tradition of Islamic cities, subsequent design of neighborhood mosques proceeded from them to the city districts. An analysis of modern Islamic architecture is important for determining the content of the world outlook and worldview of that huge part of humanity that professes Islam. The mosque has many ciphers and codes that can be deciphered by analyzing the structure, typology, space and form, and understanding the coordinate system of the spiritual space created by Islam. Canonical requirements that forbid human images contributed to an unprecedented flourishing of ornamental art. National and regional differences allowed the peoples of the Middle East to make a unique, distinctive contributions to the development of world architecture. Words and texts are also the subject of a semiotic study of urban space. The word is everywhere in the mosque. Calligraphic wall inscriptions made by skillful ligature have become pervasive, an integral part of the mosque's architectural ensemble that set the rhythm of the entire building both from the outside and the inside. Whole fragments of the Quran were compiled to decorate the interior and the entrance to the mosque.

As part of the canonical stratum that actualizes the understanding or interpretation of the architectural fabric of the mosque and cult architecture as a whole, theoretical research on the specifics of Islamic art and architecture is needed.³ In the studies of cult architecture, it is usually examined in direct relationship with religion, and an approach to all its constituent elements and traditions is carried out as if they were semantic symbols. Any religion, including Islam, has a structured spiritual universe, which can be designated as a coordinate system in the semantic and orientational space. This is a so-called system of spiritual coordinates, which sets a certain perception and understanding of the world and a person's place in it.

E. Akimova⁴ believes that a person's macrosystem of Islamic spiritual coordinates is generated by a historical process and reflected in a religious architectural structure. A prayer hall in a religious building is considered the microsystem of Islam's spiritual coordinates for a person. In addition to the orientation system in spiritual space, a person needs visual spatial coordinates in real, physical space. A person can create such a system for himself either artificially or tie it to the existing landscape. A dominant landmark in space is set up, and, due to its height, it can be perceived from all points, it is the reference point in the coordinate system. In the Muslim religion, the system of spatial-visual coordinates is divided into two systems: religious, which draws architecture in the horizontal direction towards Mecca (mihrab, direction to Qibla), and vertical, which organizes landmarks in space and carries the function of an ontological axis (Minaret).

The system of Islam's orientational coordinates is also mentioned by Igor Ibragimov in his works, but he calls it the "visual dynamics" of mosques, the study of which is very important for a deeper understanding of the essence of religious architecture. By visual dynamics we mean the visual movement of an architectural form towards Mecca, conditioned by the religious direction once determined by the Prophet Mohammad. This knowledge expands the boundaries of temple studies, opens up new research prospects, and is also important for architects and designers who design mosques.⁵

The debate regarding the definition of the mosque as a temple, which occupies a significant place in the philosophical, aesthetic, cultural and art history literature of recent decades, has been

³ See: T.Kh. Starodub, "Musulmanskie kultovye zdaniia v sisteme srednevekovogo arabskogo goroda," in: *Gorodskaiia khudozhestvennaia kultura Vostoka: Sb. statey Gos. muzeia iskusstva narodov Vostoka*, Moscow, 1990, pp. 190-200; S.A. Sukhorukov, *Arkhitektura stran islama: traditsii i novatsii*, Aletyia, St. Petersburg, 2014, 168 pp.; G.A. Pugachenkova, L.I. Rempel, *Iskusstvo Sredney Azii*, Moscow, 1980, 288 pp.; N. Khalitov, *Mechet i ee arkhitektura*, Kazan, 1994, 64 pp.; S.M. Chervonnaia, *Sovremennaiia mechet. Otechestvennyi i mirovoy opyt Noveyshego vremeni*, Tako, Torun, 2016, 478 pp.

⁴ See: E. Akimova, "Otrazhenie sushchnosti islamskoy religii v gorizontальной arkhitekturnoy forme, sisteme koordinat i tipologii kompozitsionnogo postroeniia kultovoy arkhitektury," available at [http://eakimova.com/?page=11&page_id=226].

⁵ See: I.A. Ibragimov, "Sistemy orientatsii v gorodskom prostranstve," *Akademicheskii Vestnik UralNIIproekt RAASN*, No. 2, 2009, pp. 48-51.

reflected in many publications. In particular, it appears in the works of the famous orientalist of the Russian school Sharif Shukurov,⁶ who is a consistent supporter of the concept of the mosque as a shrine in the paradigm of temple architecture. The research of Stepan Vaneyan,⁷ who distinguished the peculiarities of reading the iconography of Christian churches and Islamic mosques, as well as Evgeni Kononenko, were instrumental in the study and comprehension of the concept of architectural iconography.

The question of how the mosque fits into city iconography, as perceived by the townspeople, is very relevant in the era of urbanization. But there is another aspect of reading the text of the mosque through its own iconography, expressed in the philosophy and faith of Islam. In his studies of the philosophy of the temple, Sharif Shukurov proposes to heed attention to the fact that the plastic image of the universe, including the creation of Man, is transmitted in the Quran by referring to the architectural construction topic. The temple consciousness of Islam and the perfect concept of the Temple is shaped precisely in the Quran and in the Sunnah of the Prophet, that is, the Quran interprets the phenomenon and history of monotheism in the truth, consistency and universality of concepts. According to Shukurov, all the answers to the iconography of the mosque as a Temple are already laid down in the scriptures, and these basic requirements for believers during prayer determine the architectural features of the construction of the mosque. The mosque as an architectural structure has reached the heights of symbolic expression, serving as a testament to the unity of God.

Analyzing the research on the problem of iconography and symbolism of the mosque, Kononenko believes that the opinions of scientists and architects will be entirely subjective due to the fact that the architectural characteristics of the mosque are not enshrined in sacred or statutory texts. This certainly does not mean that mosque architecture cannot be endowed with certain symbols and perceived as an image of the Temple, but such interpretations are doomed to remain without proper Islamic argumentation, and can exist solely on the basis of the researchers' individual experience.⁸

When studying the conceptual relationship between mosque architecture and Islamic Sunnah, it is also necessary to highlight the works by Aydyn Zeynalov, Mohammed Arkoun, Akel Kahera, Latif Abdulmalik,⁹ who, as philosophers, architects and art critics in one, study the modern transformations of the religion, culture and architecture of Islam.

Due to the fact that city iconography is subject to constant changes and modernization, the study of the architectural fabric of the mosque should have been conducted in line with the potential ways to relate the traditional forms of the mosque to the challenges of the time. The architectural fabric of the mosque, in the opinion of many modern Western scholars, should develop without fear of innovations and modern architectural solutions.

In this regard, it is crucial to note the position of Mohammed Arkoun, who, based on the example of Algeria, believes that the degree of industrialization of Muslim countries corresponds to the cusp of the 20th century in Europe. Moving on to the problem of the mosque, Arkoun writes that its mediation functions are feasible only when it is integrated into the "living system" of society. Arkoun notes the role of architecture in the formation of a new identity for Muslim society. He suggests "re-

⁶ See: Sh.M. Shukurov, *Obraz khrama*, Progress-Traditsia, Moscow, 2002, 496 pp.

⁷ See: S.S. Vaneyan, *Arkhitektura i ikonografiya. "Telo simvola" v zerkale klassicheskoy metodologii*, Litres, 2013, p. 689.

⁸ See: E.I. Kononenko, "Arkhitektura mecheti kak ob'ekt interpretatsii," *Vestnik SPbGU. Iskusstvovedeniye*, Vol. 8, Issue 1, 2018, pp. 113-130.

⁹ See: A. Zeynalov, *Mechet Apsheronskogo poluostrova. Istoria i sovremennost*, Ph.D. Thesis in Art, Moscow, 2011, 182 pp.; M. Arkoun, "Islam, Urbanism, and Human Existence Today," in: *Architecture and Community*, ed. by H. Renata, D. Rastorfer, Aperture, New York, pp. 38-39; A. Kahera, L. Abdulmalik, C. Anz, *Design Criteria for Mosques and Islamic Centers. Art, Architecture and Worship*, Published by Elsevier Ltd., 2009. P. 95.

thinking the totality of Islamic legacy,” starting with architecture.¹⁰ Arkoun comes to the following conclusions about the importance of architecture in the dynamics of social modernization:

1. Architecture is a totalizing activity,
2. [It is also an expression of] demands, expectations and answers in Muslim societies.¹¹

This problem is now relevant all over the world, and in the post-Soviet space in particular, where Islamic religious architecture, due to historical reasons, is experiencing its next revival and is in a search of new solutions for mosque construction: from eclecticism, stylization and trivial repetition to the implementation of completely new forms and structures, in keeping with the spirit of our time.

Muslim views of architecture have changed dramatically since the establishment of Islam to the present day.

There are ongoing serious discussions about what a modern mosque should look like. Do mosques need a traditional look or will they be recognizable in futuristic, modernized designs? It is also worth noting that the traditional mosque-building style also differs depending on the regional traditions of religious architecture.

Today, there is an active mixing of styles, which erases geographical boundaries. Architectural details are adapted to the context and assimilated.

It is rather difficult to provide an axiological or theological assessment of this process, since temple architecture and iconography experts argue that the architecture of the mosque is not tied to a certain standard framework.

Architecture is viewed as an organic inclusion in the system of national traditions, cultures and religions. The architectural forms of Islam allow a person to exist in a variety of realities. The cult architecture of Islam has the ability to direct and organize the activities of people, influencing their spiritual world. Architecture can be viewed as purely a form of art, or it can be correlated with religious ideas, which reveals it from a completely different angle. Most of the new mosques and religious complexes in Tashkent that appeared in the post-Soviet period literally replicate the spiritual Islamic complexes that are classic for this region, such as the Hazrat Imam complex and the Kukuldash madrasah.

Examples of the symbolic and aesthetic content of new mosques (Kul Sharif in Kazan, Hazrat Sultan in Astana, Heart of Chechnya, etc.) in post-Soviet cities are the results of the architects' search for this very solution based on both traditions and modernity, aesthetics and, most importantly, the functionality of the mosque in an urban space.

According to the famous architect A. Sabitov, religious architecture in modern-day Kazakhstan can be divided into four principal groups:

1. Government contract, which goes through many approval stages. In this case, the creative will of the architect depends on the customer's requirements.
2. Original works of professional architects, which they endow with their own vision of modern Islamic architecture. Local governments and private patrons (as a rule, wealthy and educated people) usually commission these works. In this case the architect has greater creative freedom.
3. Works of craftsmen who engage amateur construction crews and work mainly in rural areas. This group's works are typically commissioned by rural communities and poorer individuals.

¹⁰ M. Arkoun, "Thinking Architecture," in: *Building for Tomorrow*, The Aga Khan Award for Architecture, ed. by A. Nanji, Academy Editions, New York, 1994, p. 33.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

4. Mosques built by foreigners. This is the smallest group, but we believe it deserves a mention, as it reflects the tendency to include Kazakhstan in the “family of Islamic peoples.”¹²

We would add one more category to the typology provided by A. Sabitov, namely, the construction of mosques by national diasporas in Kazakhstan. Such structures include the mosques of the Vainakh community in Almaty, whose parishioners mainly follow the Shafi‘i madhhab common among the Caucasian peoples, and the Tatar community’s Fatima mosque, which is located practically on the same spot where the Tatar mosque was built in the 19th century.

Nation-Building Discourse in Studies of Post-Soviet Mosques

Post-Soviet studies of the mosque are characterized by a narrative that claims that in addition to becoming a symbol of Islamic revival in the countries of Central Asia and the CIS, the mosque is also a symbol of nation-building, presentation of statehood and belonging to the Muslim world.

Domestic, Russian and foreign literary sources related to the description of political, cultural and religious processes in the Soviet and post-Soviet space were analyzed in order to study the historical and cultural transformation of the role of the mosque and Muslim institutions in the above-designated space.¹³

The post-Soviet space, presented as multicultural and multi-confessional, contributes to the revival of the lost Islamic identity. This certainly does not imply that the Islamic identity was too fragmented or “Sovietized,” in fact, in some cases it was distinct and clear-cut, but due to atheist ideology it was mainly presented as a cult ethnic component. Social, political and general cultural changes that took place in the post-Soviet space destroyed the idea of religion as an archaic conservation of religious tradition, and the paradigm of ethical renewal of societies once again began to take shape. Religion, in this case, Islam, assumed the central role in this paradigm. At the same time, the new construction of Islamic identity began. It became especially important in Central Asia, where Islam is an integral part of spiritual culture and where liberation from the Soviet atheist discourse was taking place. The post-Soviet space was being shaped, wherein post-secularism contributed to the development of a different religious identity, free from atheistic dictate. Thus, in her field studies, H  l  n Thibault conducts an analysis of the issues of religious and national revival in post-Soviet Tajikistan. The research reflects a sharp increase of the public interest in religion, especially since Tajikistan has become the only post-Soviet country where an Islamic political party has emerged.

Researchers of Islam in the Central Asian region are concerned about the reasons for the revival of Islamic identity and Islamic discourse and the ways in which the post-Soviet states began to move from atheization, the strict secular regime inherent in the U.S.S.R., to a religious one.

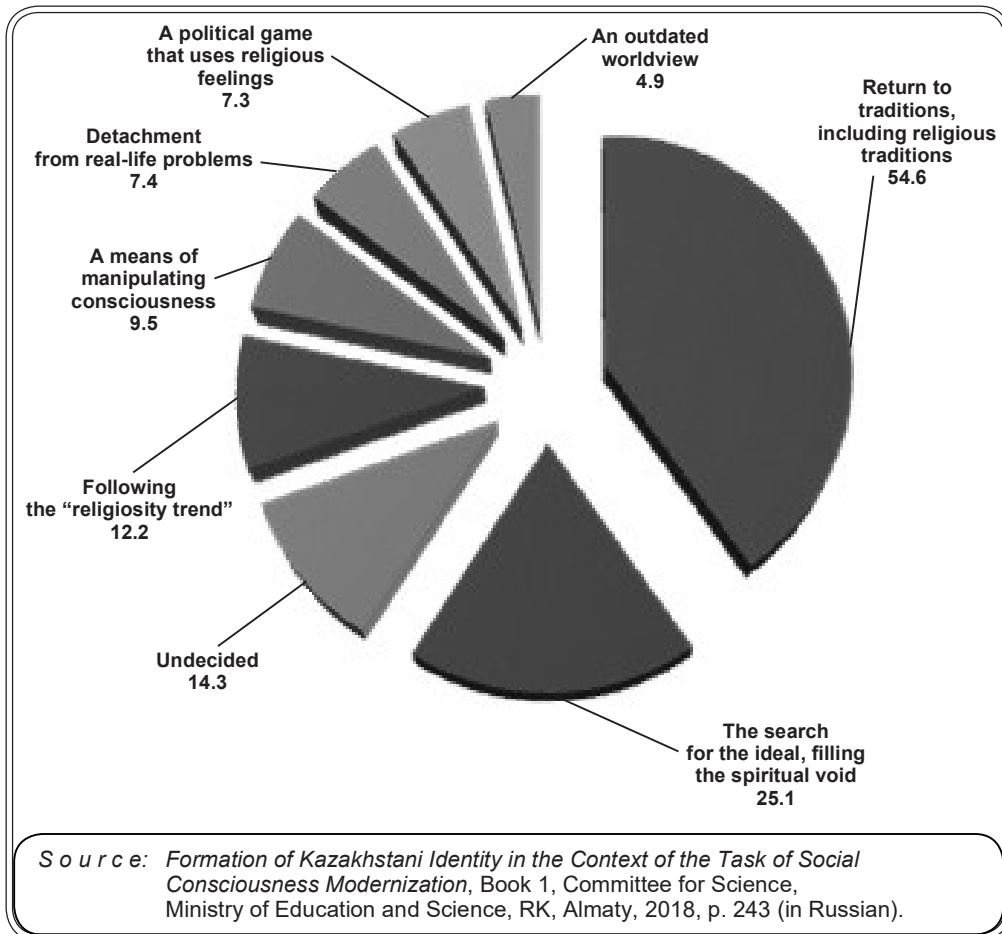
¹² A. Sabitov, “Novoe kultovoe stroitelstvo v Kazakhstane,” *Nachnem s ponedelnika*, No. 4 (564), 4-10 February, 2005, pp. 8–9.

¹³ See: Ch. Hann, M. Pelkmans, “Realigning Religion and Power in Central Asia: Islam, Nation-State and (Post) Socialism,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, No. 61 (9), 2009, pp. 1517-1541; S. Abashin, “The Logic of Islamic Practice: A Religious Conflict in Central Asia,” *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 3, No. 25, 2006, pp. 267–286; A. Khalid, “A Secular Islam: Nation, State and Religion in Uzbekistan,” *Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 35, 2003, pp. 573-598; Idem, *Islam after Communism. Religion and Politics in Central Asia*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2014, 272 pp.; *Being Muslim in Central Asia Practices, Politics, and Identities*, ed. by M. Laruelle, Brill, Leiden & Boston, MA, 2018, 344 pp.; H. Thibault, *Transforming Tajikistan: State-building and Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia* (International Library of Central Asian Studies), I.B. Tauris, London, 2018, 288 pp.

In 2018, researchers of the Institute of Philosophy, Political Science and Religious Studies in Kazakhstan conducted a sociological study within the framework of the scientific program Formation of Kazakhstani Identity in the Context of Modernization of Public Consciousness, which aimed to identify the features of religious identity formation in Kazakhstani society. Respondents were posed with the question “What, in your opinion, is the reason for the wide spread of religion after the U.S.S.R. collapsed and Kazakhstan gained independence?” The options selected by the respondents rank as follows (in a decreasing order): 1—return to traditions, including religious traditions (54.6%), 2—the search for the ideal, filling the spiritual void (25.1%), 3—following the “religiosity trend” (12.2%), 4—a means of manipulating consciousness (9.5%), 5—detachment from real-life problems (7.4%), 6—a political game that uses religious feelings (7.3%), 7—an outdated worldview (4.9%) (see Fig. 2).

Figure 2

Distribution of Responses to the Question “What, in Your Opinion, is the Reason for the Wide Spread of Religion after the U.S.S.R. Collapsed and Kazakhstan Gained Independence?”, %



As the study demonstrated, people mainly associate Islamic revival with a return to traditions, which is justified in view of the fact that Islam has been an important spiritual component of the people's consciousness for many centuries in both Kazakhstan and other Central Asian states.

It would certainly be erroneous to claim that the revival of Islam is characteristic only of the Central Asian republics. As you know, Islam is now widespread throughout the world, Muslim communities exist in Africa, the Middle East, Central, South and Southeast Asia. Europe and America are also seeing the growth of Muslim religious communities and the transformation of mosques into spaces of public social practices. In neighboring Russia, the Muslim ummah is also growing intensively, along with the revival of Orthodoxy. Today, according to Russian sources, Muslims make up 12% of Russia's population, or 15-20 million people. Accordingly, the number of mosques uniting Muslims is also growing. In 1991, there was a total of 870 mosques, but by 2015 their number increased to 8,000 (see Fig. 3).

The Moscow region is one of the most dynamic and large-scale Muslim migration centers in the entire post-Soviet space. The diversity of the Muslim space in the context of modern migration, translocal and transnational processes gives a new impetus to cultural anthropology research.

An international seminar (workshop) on the anthropology of Islam, held in Moscow in May 2019, actualized the issues related to the daily religious Muslim practices in Moscow and the Moscow region, revealing another side of the growth of regional Islamic presence. The main argument stated that we should not speak of mosque communities, rather, there is a sense of community formed around mosques, where Muslim immigrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus are inexorably drawn.¹⁴

For the countries of the former socialist bloc, the liberation from the rigid secularization of the Soviet type was marked by an active growth of religious content, which, according to P. Berger, could be characterized as the "desecularization" path. However, the post-Soviet states chose a secular, rather than a religious track, and are actively trying to balance religious and secular principles by structuring a dialog between states and confessions.

As it has been noted more than once, the religion of Islam has its own history in Kazakhstan and Central Asia. Islam and Islamic identity in Kazakh society developed in close relationship with the cultural, spiritual and national traditions of the people, striving to organically combine the Islamic principles of universalism and the mental characteristics of the Kazakh cultural tradition.

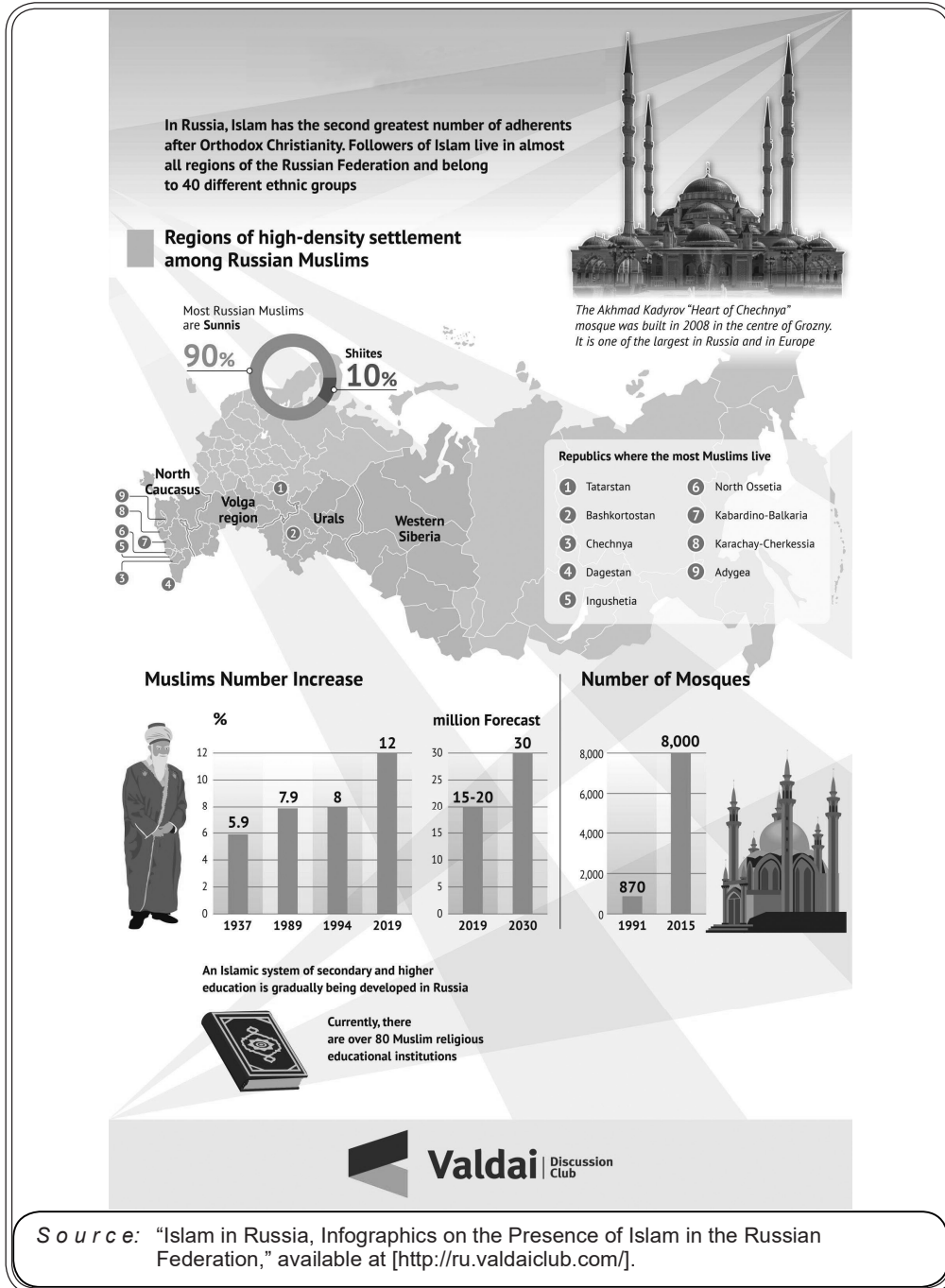
In post-Soviet studies dealing with the problems of religious identity, the main emphasis is placed on the growing role of religion in society. Indeed, the elimination of atheistic ideology and the opening of state borders did provide vast opportunities for the development of the economic and financial spheres of independent states, on the one hand, but on the other hand, it entailed an uncontrolled influx of all kinds of traditional and non-traditional religious and near-religious practices, cults and new religious movements. The issues of finding religious identity were now superimposed on the yet unhealed "colonial trauma," associated with the factor of the lost state, national and cultural identity.

The Soviet period was ambiguous in terms of religious policy-building, since there was apparent persecution and oppression of religious organizations and clergy and confiscation of religious property. However, religion was also used as a consolidating factor of Muslim societies for certain political and strategic purposes. Nevertheless, the degree and level of religiosity was still quite low. Atheistic ideology, aimed exclusively at forming a civic identity, ousted religious practices and feelings of believers from everyday life, Islamic practices were used only in two cases: birth (Sunnat rite)

¹⁴ See: "Voobrazhaemye soobshchestva mecheti v Rossii: migranty iz Tsentralnoy Azii v Moskve," *Antropologia islama. Issledovaniya v Moskovskom regione*, International workshop program, available at [<https://isp.hse.ru/data/2019/05/12/1503982984/%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%BC%D0%B0.pdf>].

Figure 3

Islam in Russia



and death. This did not contribute to a profound understanding of Islam, especially since even Islamic education was not valued by society, and was used exclusively for the administration of religious rites. There was a division between “official Islam,” approved by the Soviet authorities within a certain framework, and “everyday Islam” as a syncretic combination of pre-Islamic (local cultural traditions and beliefs of Muslim peoples that were a part of the U.S.S.R.) and Islamic practices in the private space. However, it should be recognized that Islam, historically rooted in the minds of Muslims, albeit in a latent manner (within the framework of everyday life, religious holidays, traditions), continued to exist. This was the main factor behind the rapid revival of the religious consciousness of Muslims in the post-Soviet space after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Moreover, the Islamic revival was also characterized by a dichotomous meaning: on the one hand, the issue of self-identification of post-Soviet Muslim peoples with Islamic tradition arose, and on the other, the question of politicized Islam, the so-called “Islamic factor” and its threat to the security and stability of the region under consideration, was considered. Modern markers of Islamic identity, the search for the “correct” Islamic identity, correlation of Islamic identity with traditional elements and ethnic characteristics, prevention of radicalization of Islamic identity in the globalizing world—all of this is a problematic sphere both in geopolitical terms and in modern humanities research.¹⁵

Proceeding from the above, the conventional types of Islamic identity were conceptualized, including: “traditional Islamic identity,” “popular Islamic identity,” “ethno-Islamic identity,” “new Islamic identity” (“pure Islam”), etc.

It is reasonable to point out the flexibility and plasticity of Islam, within which another Islam can also become “traditional,” one that has absorbed the best spiritual traditions of the peoples where it spread, but does not run counter to the main dogma and moral principles of Islam.

Another post-Soviet Islamic discourse is state policy and the nationalization of Islam. It is the search for ways to solve state-confessional relations, to govern the people with the support of religion.

Alma Sultangalieva noted in her book that there is an ongoing nationalization of Islam, where the state, in turn, fights for Islam with its opponents and claims not merely control over Islam, but the place of religious authority.¹⁶

Exploring the daily practices of Islam in the Astana mosque, Alima Bissenova uses the rhetoric of “bourgeois Islam,” adapted to the emerging middle class and presented as “good” Islam, instilling values that both secular and religious authorities validate.¹⁷

Political will often creates an overstated framework, where the real capabilities of architecture and urban planning practice need to fit. This is an idealized model, and each new capital or city uses the language of national identity to achieve it through architecture and symbolism.

A clear example of political will is the Turkmenbashi Ruhy Mosque in Ashgabad, the main mosque of Turkmenistan, named after Saparmurat Turkmenbashi. Stylistically, the mosque corresponds to the specified Turkmen “white architecture” style. Its total area is 18,000 sq m, and the walls

¹⁵ See: A.K. Sultangalieva, “‘Vozvrashchenie islama’ v Kazakhstan, Almaty, 2012, 170 pp.; Y. Ro’i, A. Wainer, “Muslim Identity and Islamic Practice in Post-Soviet Central Asia,” *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 28, No. 3, 2009, pp. 303-322; R. Shaykhutdinov, D. Achilov, “Islam, Islamism and Collective Action in Central Asia,” *TRAMES*, Vol. 68/63 (4), No. 18, 2014, pp. 383-405; M.E. Louw, *Everyday Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia*, Routledge, London, 2007, 220 pp.; F. Aliev, “Islamic Revival in Azerbaijan: The Process and Its Political Implications,” *The Caucasus & Globalization*, Vol. 1 (2), 2007, pp. 70-79; D. Lewis, *After Atheism: Religion and Ethnicity in Russia and Central Asia (Caucasus World)*, Routledge, 2000, 324 pp.; A. Sengupt, “The Making of a Religious Identity: Islam and the State in Uzbekistan,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 34, No. 52, 1999, pp. 3649-3652.

¹⁶ See: A.K. Sultangalieva, op. cit., p. 33.

¹⁷ See: A. Bissenova, “Building a Muslim Nation: The Role of the Central Mosque of Astana,” in: *Kazakhstan in the Making: Legitimacy, Symbols, and Social Changes*, Lexington Books, 2016, p. 211.

of the mosque are decorated not only with sayings from the Quran, but also with quotations from *Ruhnama*, a book by Saparmurat Niyazov.

In Kazakhstan, modern architectural styles, including elements of national culture, are used alongside the traditional Arab style. The influence of the historical school on modern mosque construction is also present in the project of the new Hazret Sultan cathedral mosque in Astana. The mosque is designed in the classical Islamic style using traditional Kazakh ornaments and decorative elements.

Yet another example is an unusual building, the main Pavlodar mosque named after Mashhur Zhusip. It is shaped as an eight-pointed star, the dome of the mosque is sky-colored, and shaped as a shanyrak or a yurt (although different interpretations are offered, including the shape of a Kazakh batyr's helmet).

In her studies of the modern architecture of Kazakhstan, Sara Sadykova concludes that the following key architectural and artistic directions are in place: on the one hand, the architecture of the new mosques has a pronounced tendency to reproduce ancient medieval images; on the other hand, there is an ongoing search for a new architecture of Kazakhstani mosques, based on the latest construction technologies, which will most likely reflect national, modern and Islamic features.¹⁸

Today, in research related to the construction of mosques and the representation of the power and wealth of the states initiating this construction, the issue of the size and uniqueness of mosque projects remains.

In the Central Asian region, this process is accompanied by the narrative of "the largest mosque in Central Asia." All of the post-Soviet countries have attempted to beat the previous record. Up to this day, the Hazret Sultan mosque in the capital of Kazakhstan was considered the largest and most beautiful mosque, but now Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have claimed online that they are now claiming the title. This is, in fact, an ongoing process.

Natalie Koh also notes in her research the phenomenon of "gigantism," monumentalism and politicization inherent in the new mosques in Central Asia, saying that religious architecture, including the mosque, has been used to demonstrate political will and statehood since the ancient times.¹⁹

Svetlana Chervonnaia, a Tatar researcher of the mosque, places the situation of building new mosques in Tatarstan, namely the Tauba mosque, in the context of redundancy, since she believes that the fascination with the symbolic capital of the new mosque in the eyes of regional clergy should have become an indicator of prestige and, most importantly, a symbol of Tatarstan's independence. From her point of view, this experience of overcoming the cautious Soviet attitude to the size and types of religious buildings is a characteristic feature of the post-Soviet Muslim communities.²⁰

The Mosque as a Sacred Geography Object in Kazakhstan

One of the breakthrough state projects in Kazakhstan, the Ruhani Zhangyru program, which aimed to modernize the public consciousness, was designed to revive and strengthen the spiritual and

¹⁸ See: S.Sh. Sadykova, "Arkhitektura novoy sobornoy mecheti «Hazret Sultan» v g. Astana," available at [<http://repository.enu.kz/xmlui/bitstream/handle/123456789/2307/SadykovaSSh-Sobornaya-mechet-Khazret-Sultan.pdf?sequence=1>].

¹⁹ See: N. Koch *et al.*, "Mosques as Monuments: An Inter-Asian Perspective on Monumentality and Religious Landscapes," *Cultural Geographies*, Vol. 25 (1), 2018, pp. 183-199.

²⁰ See: S.M. Chervonnaia, "Musulmanskie mecheti v sovremennoy Rossii," available at [<http://mosgues-3.narod.ru/statja3.htm>].

national roots of the people, and, at the same time, to continue the country's course towards intensive development. The program covers a number of projects to strengthen national identity, among which the Sacred Geography project is notable. It is tasked with recreating an integrated field of the country's spiritual shrines and sacred places, revered by people since ancient times.

In general, the concepts of sacred places and sacred space have a fairly broad interpretation. The interest in the study of sacred spaces is believed to have sharply increased in connection with the search for spiritual guidelines and foundations of a particular people. However, the interest in the search for statehood through the prism of sacred topography is also present.

The use of sacred objects' potential to demonstrate the national spiritual revival of the people as a whole is inherent in Central Asian countries, since the appeal to cultural memory and spiritual archetypes gives an impetus to realize one's identity.

The sacred objects of Kazakhstan include objects beyond mosques. Cult architecture was originally represented in the Central Asian region by a variety of objects from mazars to majestic mausoleums and ensembles. The pre-Islamic period in the region's history was distinguished by its own cultural traditions and archetypes associated with the veneration of natural forces, ancestors and their spirits, personalities endowed with special, supernatural abilities, who were often canonized, etc.

The pivotal element of the Kazakh national culture was the Islamic tradition, which most fully accumulated spiritual and moral experience. We can say that the cultural traditions of the Kazakh people and the universal Islamic tradition fulfilled the common task of the spiritual and moral consolidation of the ethnos.²¹

The Sacred Geography of Kazakhstan project is aimed at identifying, reviving and popularizing the sacred objects within the country, which, in turn, will make it possible to systematize and analyze a huge layer of archeological, cultural, and ethnographic scientific material for the subsequent constructive development of this area.

Meanwhile, the classification of sacred objects in Kazakhstan covers the following:

- particularly revered monuments of natural heritage, archeological and architectural monuments;
- large medieval urban centers and capitals of the Kazakh Khanate;
- religious and cult objects that function as places of worship;
- sacred places associated with historical figures;
- sacred places associated with historical and political events.

The sacred map of Kazakhstan currently contains more than 600 objects of cultural, historical and natural heritage of the people of the republic, including such unique examples of religious architecture as the Zharkent Mosque, the Azret Sultan complex, the mausoleum of Khoja Akhmet Yasawi, the Beket ata and Shapak ata underground mosques in West Kazakhstan, Ishan Mosque, etc.

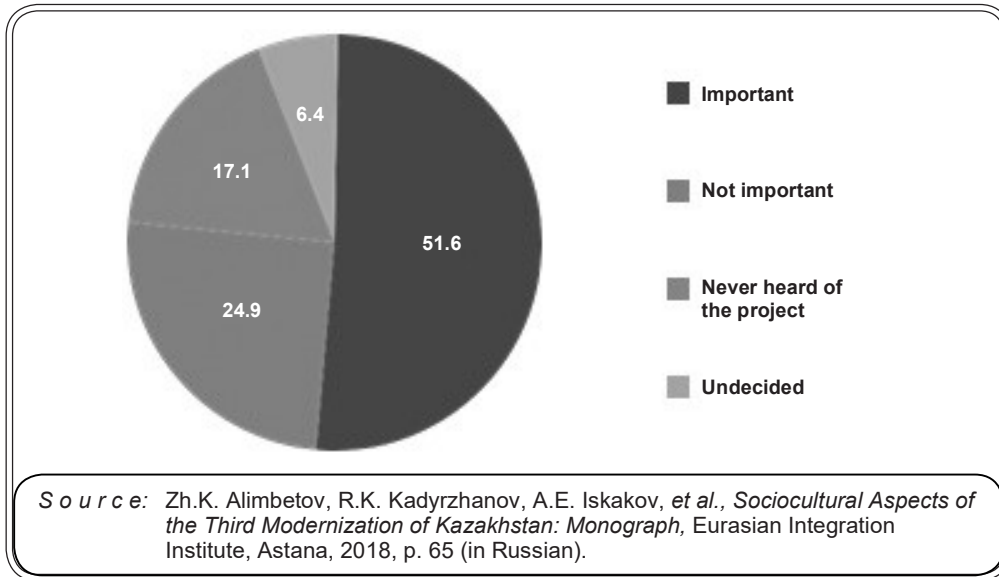
The state program Ruhani Zhangyru launched in Kazakhstan is very active, and the systematic popularization of the program itself and its results in society is underway. The established design centers throughout the country provide the program with expert and methodological support. In 2018, the Institute of Eurasian Integration conducted sociological research aimed at identifying the degree of perception and support of the population for modernization. Thus, the results of the sociological survey confirm the positive perception of the Sacred Geography of Kazakhstan project in society. In fact, every second Kazakhstani (51.6%) considers this project important. The share of respondents

²¹ See: Zh. Turganbayeva, N. Seitakhmetova, M. Bektenova, Sh. Zhandossova, "Islamic Identity in the Context of History and Its Prospects: Religious and Political Aspects," *Central Asia and the Caucasus. English Edition*, Vol. 20, Issue 2, 2019, p. 108.

who do not attach importance to this project is two times less (24.9%). 17.1% of the respondents answered that they have heard about this project for the first time (see Fig. 4).

Figure 4

Evaluation of Importance of the Sacred Geography of Kazakhstan Project, %



Thus, the sociological analysis demonstrates the constructive interest of Kazakhstanis in preserving the sacred roots for religious and cultural identification.

Conclusion

The role of the mosque in the sacralization of the Islamic tradition is associated, first of all, with the sacralization of the Word of Allah, the Quran and the Quranic epigraphy. Sacralization in a mosque is often associated with strict adherence to rituals associated with religious practice, which includes sacralization of the Islamic space, the height at which the Quran is held and the positioning of worshipers, the sacralization of the Qibla, the correlation (spatial) with the main mosque (Masjid al-Haram).

One of the important roles of the mosque is educational. Historical discourse shows that the mosque has always been an educational center. At the mosques, madrasahs were opened, where the Arabic language was taught along with the study and interpretation of the Quran, a deep study of hadiths and the normative rules of the Islamic tradition.

The mosque is the theoretical and practical realization of Islamic life; it contains the source of the Islamic cultural heritage. The pinnacle of Islamic architecture—the mosque—plays the key role in the spiritual unification of Muslims and the preservation of Islamic cultural identity.