

American University of Central Asia

Policy Brief

**Post-secular Cities: How Mosques Change the Physical, Cultural and
Social Landscapes of Cities in Central Asia**

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Abstract

This policy brief presents the findings of a research study exploring the integration of mosques into the physical, social, and cultural fabric of Bishkek, Tashkent, and Almaty. The study results discuss topics such as politically framed conditions, urban planning perspectives, local design style, sanitary conditions, and attitudes toward women. Results showed that such integration of the mosques was influenced considerably by the political environment and course of the three states. At the same time, urban planning perspectives and local design styles are diverse. Observations of the mosques revealed that Tashkent's sanitary conditions are better than Bishkek and Almaty's. In addition, it was noticed that not all mosques have dedicated spaces for women, or the existing spaces often suffer from poor conditions. Talking about policy recommendations, there are three main points:

- Support the construction and maintenance of mosques
- Engagement with the wider community
- Developing more inclusive practices for women and other marginalized groups

Introduction

This policy brief presents the findings of a research study exploring the integration of mosques into the physical, social and cultural fabric of Bishkek, Tashkent, and Almaty. The objectives of the study were to examine the role of mosques in the urban landscape, define the local design style of each city's mosques, and provide recommendations for policymakers and urban planners. Through convenient sampling, data was

gathered from mosque community members and imams. The research findings reveal unique characteristics of mosques in each city, influenced by political framing, urban planning perspectives, sanitary conditions, and attitudes toward women. The brief highlights the importance of considering these factors for effective integration of mosques into the urban fabric. Recommendations focus on promoting religious freedom,

cultural integration, inclusive urban planning, and providing adequate facilities for worshippers. By incorporating the research insights into policymaking and urban planning processes, cities can create environments that respect diversity, foster social cohesion, and ensure the inclusive integration of mosques within their communities.

Methodology

Within the framework of this study, 26 mosques were visited in three cities of Central Asia: Bishkek (10), Tashkent (8), and Almaty (8). The qualitative research method with semi-structured in-depth interviews was used in this study to achieve research objectives. In addition, the data was also collected through observation and record field notes. Semi-structured enabled researchers to ask additional questions during the interview that contributed to revealing other relevant topics. In general, 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted for approximately 30-90 minutes each. In addition, through convenient sampling, data was gathered from mosque community members and imams.

Any problems encountered in the conduct were the need for representations of diverse perspectives, possible biases, no imams-respondents in Bishkek, time and space limitations, and physical limitations of the researches.

Results

The findings have demonstrated that mosques in Bishkek, Tashkent, and Almaty exhibit unique characteristics that resist easy

generalization or categorization within the broader context of "Mosques of Central Asia."

Politically framed conditions

The integration of the mosques into the social, cultural context and urban landscape is influenced to a considerable extent by the political environment and course of the three states.

Bishkek. In Bishkek, the practice of Islam is generally free, allowing individuals to freely engage in religious activities. However, it is notable that mosques are sometimes exploited by politicians as a means to gain political support or score political points. It is worth noting that power dynamics and power relationships with foreign funds exert influence over the functioning and development of mosques in Bishkek, not only in regards to politics, but also in terms of the visual appearance of architecture and interior design.

Tashkent. The mosques in Tashkent are primarily state-controlled, with the government exerting significant influence over their operations. Tashkent has ambitions to become a Center of Islamic Civilizations, and this aspiration shapes the approach to the management and development of mosques in the city.

Almaty. In Almaty, the state closely regulates the functioning and activities of mosques. The government does not actively support the construction of new mosques. Almaty is considered to be the least religious of the three cities,

with a relatively lower level of religious observance among its population. This is reflected in the lower attendance to the mosques in Almaty compared to Bishkek and Tashkent.

Urban Planning Perspectives in Bishkek, Tashkent, and Almaty

The research underscores the pressing need for public spaces in all three cities. In this context, the role of mosques as significant public spaces in Bishkek, Tashkent, and Almaty is of paramount importance.

Bishkek. The findings reveal that urban planning in Bishkek is primarily characterized by spontaneous development, with little consideration given to the architectural surroundings. The emphasis is often placed on simplicity rather than complex design considerations. Furthermore, the quantity of development takes precedence over the quality of urban planning.

Tashkent. In Tashkent, the focus of urban planning revolves around the geographical positioning of mosques with respect to the Qibla (the direction of prayer). The planning process in this city is described as non-rational, characterized by physical destruction of historical neighborhoods (mahalas).

Almaty. The findings indicate that urban planning in Almaty often disregards the existing architectural ensembles or cohesive design principles. This approach can lead to a lack of harmony and continuity

within the urban fabric of the city.

These insights highlight the diverse approaches and challenges in urban planning across Bishkek, Tashkent, and Almaty.

Local Design Style

In the mosques of Almaty and Bishkek, a distinct local style is notably absent. However, in Tashkent, there is a preserved and continued tradition of craftsmanship, maintaining a strong visual identity that is passed down from generation to generation.

Sanitary conditions

The sanitary conditions of mosques vary significantly among the cities. However, it is worth noting that the majority of mosques in Tashkent generally have better sanitary conditions compared to those in Bishkek or Almaty.

Attitudes toward women

Some general trends regarding women's experiences in mosques across Bishkek, Tashkent, and Almaty can be identified as:

Bishkek. Not all mosques have dedicated spaces for women, and the existing spaces often suffer from poor conditions. Negative attitudes towards women, stemming from a patriarchal culture, have been observed.

Tashkent. More mosques in Tashkent provide designated areas for women, although some may lack essential facilities like washrooms. Instances of negative attitudes towards women in mosques have not been reported.

Almaty. Not all mosques in Almaty have designated spaces for women, but there is a relatively higher provision of washrooms for women compared to Bishkek. Mosques in Almaty are perceived as places where women can spend leisure time or seek solace during difficult times.

Conclusion

Our research reveals that mosques in each city play diverse roles within their respective communities, emphasizing their varied functions and significance. Furthermore, the study sheds light on the diverse approaches and challenges encountered in the realms of urban planning and interior design of mosques across Bishkek, Tashkent, and Almaty. Moreover, it becomes evident that the integration of mosques into the social and cultural fabric of these cities is not uniform. However, to the variations in roles and characteristics of mosques across Bishkek, Tashkent, and Almaty, a notable similarity found in the research is the mistreatment of inclusiveness, particularly in regard to women, within all three cities. Our general observations highlight the need for greater inclusiveness and improved facilities for women across all three cities. In addition to the aforementioned points, it is important to address the sanitary conditions within mosques as observed during the research.

Policy Recommendations

1. Support the construction and maintenance of mosques: The Muftiate and private entities should support the construction and

maintenance of mosques. This may include helping communities build and maintain their mosques by providing financial support, land or other resources.

2. Engagement with the wider community: In order to promote interfaith dialogue and cooperation, mosques should be encouraged to engage with the wider community. This can help build bridges between different communities and dispel misconceptions and stereotypes about Islam and Muslims. The creation of public spaces is part of this process.

3. Developing more inclusive practices for women and other marginalized groups. Mosques could develop programs and policies that ensure that all members of the community have equal access to and are included in the community.