

Mosques as monuments: an inter-Asian perspective on monumentality and religious landscapes

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journals.sagepub.com/home/cgj**Natalie Koch**

Syracuse University, USA

Anar Valiyev

ADA University, Azerbaijan

Khairul Hazmi Zaini

Urban Brunei, Brunei

Abstract

This article examines monumental mosques and particularly those that are built to be and function more as monuments than as places for worship. We consider the role of monumentality in religious landscapes by way of six exemplary mosques in three different world regions – Central Asia, the Arabian Peninsula, and Southeast Asia. Tracing their unique histories and the identity narratives inscribed in their built form, we stress three broader commonalities among these mosques-as-monuments: (1) each is the result of top-down, state-funded planning infused with strong nationalist or ideological symbolism, (2) each was designed to be an iconic architectural showpiece in the country's capital city, and (3) each represents a stark contrast to other places of worship within that national or regional context. In this unique comparative study, we use an interpretive approach designed to push the research on monuments and monumentality into new directions and new empirical contexts, and specifically to ask why and with what effect some religious sites are primarily monuments and only secondarily places of worship.

Keywords

Arabian Peninsula, Central Asia, monumentality, mosques, nationalism, religious landscapes, Southeast Asia

Corresponding author:

Natalie Koch, Department of Geography, The Maxwell School, Syracuse University, 144 Eggers Hall, Syracuse, NY 13244-1020, USA.

Email: nkoch@maxwell.syr.edu

Introduction

Religious landscapes are essential elements to the urban fabric all around the world. Coming in a vast array of sizes and shapes, religious sites are important places of worship for citizens and denizens, who weave their daily lives in, around, and through the built and social structures they afford.¹ Beyond these more everyday engagements, some sites also take on special significance as destinations of international pilgrimage, such as the Grand Mosque in Mecca, the Boudhanath Stupa in Kathmandu, the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, or St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City. Even among less iconic religious sites, they can often be among the most important tourist destinations in a particular city or country. This is doubly so in places characterized by a certain 'religionationalism' fusing religious and national identity narratives, such as Christianity in Italy, Islam in Turkey, or Buddhism in Thailand, where the tourist's gaze is frequently directed at the country's churches, mosques, or temples.² Although never entirely devoid of religious significance, many of these various sites function similar to hallowed national monuments or deathscapes.³

In some cases, the balance toward iconic monumentality can outweigh the spiritual nature of the venue. This article narrows in on these cases and examines religious sites that seem to function primarily as monuments and only secondarily as places of worship. While there are countless examples globally, we illustrate by way of six exemplary mosques in three different world regions: Central Asia, the Arabian Peninsula, and Southeast Asia (Table 1). Although political and cultural geographers have examined monumentality in various ways, religious landscapes are less frequently examined through this lens – largely because the spiritual nature places of worship typically prevails over the potential to become monumental icons. This article thus aims to push this research into new directions theoretically, and into new empirical contexts, asking: what unites iconic religious sites, which have a specifically monumental initial design and rationale? And what explains the inter-Asian convergence around the practice of developing mosques as monuments?

Our central focus is on the identity narratives that political authorities seek to promote through their development, though we recognize the crucial importance of how ordinary people perceive and interact with these sites. Attending to the narratives promoted by the authors of these 'mosques as monuments' is significant, we suggest, because iconic religious structures have a long history as venues for political leaders to assert and perform what Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori refer to as 'sacred authority'.⁴ As they note, political legitimacy is often deeply interwoven with religious authority and fused with national identity narratives. While

Table 1. Monumental mosque case studies compared.

Mosque	Location	Year completed	Cost (US\$)	Capacity
Heydar Mosque	Baku, Azerbaijan	2014	–	5000
Turkmenbashi Ruhy Mosque	Kipchak (Ashgabat), Turkmenistan	2004	100–150m	10,000
Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque	Abu Dhabi, UAE	2007	545m	40,000
Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque	Muscat, Oman	2001	–	20,000
Omar Ali Saifuddin Mosque	Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei	1958	9.2m	5000
Istiqlal Mosque	Jakarta, Indonesia	1978	12m	120,000

they are scholars of Muslim politics, their findings are amply confirmed by scholars studying various other religions and nationalisms all around the world.⁵ Our case studies of monumental mosques, therefore, are just one among many potential studies of monumental religious structures. Ourselves scholars from Azerbaijan, Brunei, and the United States, we have collectively lived and worked in Central Asia, the Arabian Peninsula, and Southeast Asia for decades, which has led us to see monumental sites as an especially incisive window on religious identity narratives in and across Asia.

The relationship between nationalism and religion has a long and complex history, which Mark Juergensmeyer describes as ‘ambivalent’: sometimes it entails nationalist rejection of religious tropes in favor of ‘secularism’ and other times entails an explicit fusion with local religious practices and nationalist identity narratives.⁶ Anthony Smith also takes this ambivalence as a starting point, suggesting that the ‘kaleidoscopic nature of the permutations of the secular and the religious in the national identities and nationalisms of every continent and period’, demands that scholars interrogate the *political effects* of how the relationship between religion and nationalism is configured.⁷ However, it can be a daunting task to put such a geographically and historically informed analysis into practice, as Paul Veyne notes, ‘unless we allow specifications, historical accidents, and ideological influences to proliferate, at the price of endless verbiage’.⁸ A comparative approach, which narrows in on specific practices that appear to be common across space and time, offers one way beyond the eternal idiographic challenge that Veyne describes.

In this article, we are particularly interested in the practice of monumental mosque construction. Why do state leaders in such diverse contexts across Asia and in different historical and geopolitical moments develop monumental mosques? In examining the diverse set of mosques-as-monuments in Central Asia, the Arabian Peninsula, and Southeast Asia, we chose the cases based on three primary commonalities: (1) each is the result of top-down, state-funded planning, indexing a ‘new’ symbolic order and infused with strong nationalist or ideological symbolism; (2) each was designed with a strong focus on becoming an iconic architectural showpiece in the country’s capital city, often serving as a major tourist attraction; and (3) each represents a stark contrast to other places of worship within that national or regional context. Of course, the sites have more differences than similarities, including the historical moment in which they are developed. However, as material expressions of elite legitimacy claims and identity narratives, considering these cases together offers important insights into the political and cultural geographies of the countries where they are developed, as well as broader ‘inter-Asian’ regional dynamics.

Considered comparatively, we argue that the common practice of developing monumental mosques in the six case countries is indicative of the political challenges faced by authorities in emergent states, who use them instrumentally to redefine themselves and their ‘nations’ in the era of independence. The mosques help to focalize, or concretize, political identity narratives, both indexing and substantiating a new symbolic order. This ‘focalization effect’⁹ is something that political and cultural geographers have long described as central to the material inscription of nationalist narratives onto certain objects or spaces, such as monuments or territories. These sites have far more immediacy and offer people the opportunity to visualize or concretely interact with abstract narratives about the ‘nation’ as an imagined community and its ostensible values, such as ‘freedom’, ‘equality’, or ‘duty’.¹⁰ The literature on nationalism has much to say about these secular values, but it is relatively silent on the issue of religiously infused identity narratives and nonsecular ‘monuments’. The iconic mosques described here indicate that many of these processes are the same and, therefore, should not be treated as something exceptional to Muslim-majority countries of Asia, to be set aside from the broader literature on nation-building, but as fundamentally *normal* instantiations of nationalist discourse and political legitimization practices in emergent states.

Monumentality and religious landscapes

Political and cultural geographers, among others, have examined the central role of state-funded monuments and monumental urban landscapes in promoting official identity narratives in many parts of the world.¹¹ Yet within this literature, religious sites have received comparatively little attention, despite the wide recognition that religion and their iconic spaces often figure centrally in national and political identity narratives. Among a handful of important exceptions is Dmitri Sidorov's research on the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow.¹² The church was built by decree of Tsar Alexander I, as a monument to Russia's victory in the 1812 Patriotic War against Napoleon, which was widely interpreted as a divine intervention.¹³ However, the magnificent church was demolished in 1931 as part of the early Soviet campaign against religion. Later rebuilt in the post-Soviet era, it opened in 1997 during a period of renewed religiosity in Russia. The cathedral's enormous size had always been a defining feature of its monumentality. However, the reconstructed church's capacity of 10,000 people far outstripped any actual demands or needs of the religious community in Moscow and residents were largely opposed to the tremendously expensive redevelopment scheme, while other churches throughout the city remained neglected or closed down due to insufficient funds.¹⁴

Sidorov's study is important because it shows how religious sites or places of worship can also be major iconic projects, which political leaders use to promote particular identity narratives in their cities and countries. Large-scale iconic structures matter, not simply for their ability to suck in the state's resources but also for the outsize symbolic value that is accorded to the gigantic. Susan Stewart elaborates,

The gigantic is appropriated with the state and its institutions and put on parade with great seriousness, not as a representative of the material life of the body, but as a symbol of the abstract social formations making up the life in the city.¹⁵

Monumental urban forms have a long history of being colonized by state elites, often because they are the only ones with the resources to realize them in the contemporary era of state-based political geography. While it is clear that some material realities underpin the reading of something as 'gigantic' or 'monumental' (both terms denoting extremely large size), monumentality is a scalar trait that is ultimately and necessarily relative: what appears monumental in one context may not seem inordinately scaled in another context. Scale is, as geographers have long emphasized, a social construction. As such, we also take a relational tack to our analysis that does not assume an objectivist understanding of what does or does not 'count' as monumental. Rather, we begin with the assumption that the monumentality of these projects is tied to their social relation to other spaces of worship in their particular contexts.

Methodologically, this article adopts an inter-Asian comparative approach to account for the relative understanding of monumentality and the elaborate on the various conjunctures and disjunctures across the six monumental mosques considered. An 'inter-Asian' lens is increasingly being adopted by scholars working in various parts of the Asian continent, stretching from the Middle East to Southeast Asia and north to the Russian Arctic. Guided by a postcolonial perspective and poststructural critical theory, this scholarship points to the vast potential to derive intellectual and empirical insights from considering connections between people and places beyond the Western 'core' that has long dominated the social sciences.¹⁶ Our goal is not to present a comprehensive account of these six sites. Rather, using an interpretive approach based on the three authors' varied ethnographic experiences living and researching in these regions over the past decade, our goal is gesture to a wider trend, which we hope will stimulate further reflection on the varied forms and functions of monumentality in religious landscapes.



Figure 1. Heydar Mosque, Baku, Azerbaijan.

Source: Azerbaijan Government Public Domain (<http://baku-ih.gov.az/page/59.html>).

Central Asia

Heydar Mosque (Azerbaijan)

Azerbaijan's magnificent new mosque, named for the late president Heydar Aliyev, was inaugurated in December 2014 (Figure 1). The mosque is claimed to be the largest mosque in the Caucasus, surpassing the impressive Akhmad Kadyrov Mosque in Grozny, Chechnya, and the Makhachkala Grand Mosque in Dagestan. The Heydar Mosque is constructed on the territory of 12,000 m² and adorned with ornamental stones in style of Shirvan-Absheron school of architecture. The mosque has four 95-m-high minarets and holds two 35- and 55-m-high domes.¹⁷ The interior design of the mosque also resembles Azerbaijani architecture style. The carpets of the mosque, covering 920 m² in total, are made in resemblance of the famous Sheikh Safi carpet (that is currently on display at Victoria and Albert Museum in London). Although Baku's new Heydar Mosque may be the largest in terms of its built space, only 5000 people can pray simultaneously – while the Kadyrov and Makhachkala mosques have capacities of 10,000 and 17,000, respectively.

One of the most positive aspects of religious life in post-Soviet Azerbaijan is the absence of visible conflicts among Shi'a and Sunni communities. In a country where roughly 75–80 percent follow Shi'a Islam and 20–25 percent are Sunni, Azerbaijan is one of the few countries where sectarian violence has been absent. Nevertheless, mosques in Azerbaijan are nominally divided as Sunni or Shi'a. One of the magnificent mosques of Azerbaijan, Bibi Heybat, was reconstructed by the late Heydar Aliyev and until recently was considered as the largest Shi'a mosques in the region. The Heydar Mosque, by contrast, was constructed with the intention to remove the barriers between the Shi'a and Sunni communities and send signals to the outside world about Azerbaijan's ostensibly forward-looking effort to transcend sectarian divides. For example, the mosque has two co-leaders, each representing Shi'a and Sunni streams of Islam. And in early 2016, so-called 'Unity Prayers' were launched to join the two communities, reportedly to 'further increase the authority of Azerbaijan as center of tolerance'.¹⁸ And unlike other religious places in Azerbaijan, the Heydar Mosque is not supervised by the Spiritual Board of Moslems of Caucasus – the main 'non-state'

organization overseeing religious organizations in country. Instead, it will be under supervision of Executive Powers of Baku.

The Heydar Mosque has been strategically positioned as a monument to Aliyev's vision of a unified religious community under strong state supervision. To achieve this, elites in Azerbaijan, like their Soviet predecessors, are well aware that monopolizing religious discourse must also be accompanied by a monopoly on places of worship. The government has actively been crowding out and closing down numerous mosques in the city.¹⁹ The new Heydar Mosque actually contributes to this overarching trend by introducing a new pinnacle to the hierarchy of religious sites in Azerbaijan, effectively subordinating all others in the shadow of its glow. At the opening ceremony in December 2014, the son of Heydar Aliyev and current president, Ilham Aliyev, emphasized the role of late president in preserving the religion and tolerance in the country:

He always pointed out that while remaining true to our national and religious customs and traditions, we must build a strong state. This was his strategic view. The construction and establishment of relationships between the state and religion is our tremendous success. This policy continues today. It was under Heydar Aliyev's leadership that more than 500 mosques were built in Azerbaijan. Hundreds of mosques were repaired.²⁰

In addition to buttressing the Azerbaijani government's narrative about the need for a 'strong state', Aliyev's quote illustrates how mosques have become important symbols for the leadership to promote its image of tolerance and multiculturalism. They often boast about the 250 mosques that have been built or repaired in Azerbaijan over the past 11 years, belying the fact that the government has actually clamped down on free religious practice and nonstate sanctioned expressions of Islam over that same time period. Yet the fanfare of the ceremony overshadowed any potential critiques, with distinguished guests including Muslim religious leaders from all over the Caucasus, as well as representatives of other confessions, such as the Russian Orthodox Archbishop of Baku and the Head of the Mountain Jews Community in Baku.²¹ As with the other cases discussed below, the new Heydar Mosque is monumental not just in size, but in the manner that people are encouraged to engage with it as an object of reverie or an icon, rather than a meaningful site of democratic worship.

Turkmenbashi Ruhya Mosque (Turkmenistan)

The Turkmenbashi Ruhya Mosque memorializes Turkmenistan's first president, Saparmurat Niyazov, who died in 2006 (Figure 2). It is situated on the outskirts of the capital Ashgabat, in the village of Kipchak, which was Niyazov's birthplace. The eccentric autocrat, who sought to radically transform the capital into a stunning landscape of white marble buildings, allowed many icons and monuments to be built in his honor, including the copious gold statues and busts of him through the country. He personally initiated the development of the Turkmenbashi Ruhya Mosque, which follows the formal title he adopted during his rule. Paralleling Mustafa Kemal's popular appellation as father of the Turks, 'Atatürk', Turkmenbashi means 'father of the Turkmen'.

Adjacent to Niyazov's mosque is his mausoleum, which, developed by the French construction firm Bouygues, is remarkably modeled on Napoleon's tomb.²² Perhaps most offensive to the faithful, however, is the mosque's inscription on an entry arch, which refers to the *Ruhnama*, a spiritual 'guide' for the Turkmen nation authored by Niyazov. A 'blend of pseudo-history, genealogy, homily, memoir and loosely articulated political analysis',²³ the late president considered it to be a form of scripture, and the arch inscription explicitly elevates it above the Quran: 'The *Ruhnama* is the holiest book – the Quran is the book of God' (*Ruhnama mukaddes kitapdyr – Gurhan Allanyň Kitaby*). This case is probably the most clear example of glorifying the secular leader above the spiritual



Figure 2. Turkmenbashi Ruhy Mosque, Kipchak, Turkmenistan.
Source: Natalie Koch, May 2014.

values, going well beyond the otherwise somewhat ambiguous balance we find in monumental mosques between aggrandizing the eponymous leader and marking true religious sentiment.

Proclaimed to be Central Asia's largest mosque at the time, with a 10,000-person capacity, the site is reported to have cost between US\$100m and US\$150m. According to the Bouygues website, its development was sponsored by the Moroccan Interior Ministry – a fact that suggests that the Turkmenbashi Ruhy Mosque sits squarely within a broader trend of offshore elite patronage networks tied to the construction industry across Central Asia and the Caucasus.²⁴ Specifically, nearly all major, state-funded, and iconic developments in the region's spectacular cities serve as conduits for elites to launder resource rents to offshore accounts through a web of front companies and foreign partnerships.²⁵ The Kipchak mosque is similar to these countless other government-sponsored urban icons, which function more as monuments than as sites catering to a popular demand and use aligning to its stated purposes.²⁶ Indeed, just like Ashgabat's various urban icons, the mosque remains entirely empty almost all the time, with an extremely rare tourist stopping in. Even the government, which routinely forces its citizens to attend mass celebrations and other events, has struggled to attract visitors to the venue to commemorate Niyazov's death, which has been named the 'First President Saparmurat Niyazov Turkmenbashi the Great Memorial Day'.²⁷

This notwithstanding, the Turkmenbashi Ruhy Mosque played an important role in the Niyazov's effort to narrate a particular vision of religious identity in Turkmenistan. This vision is, foremost, one of continued state control of religious practice – an ideological control mechanism inherited from Soviet times. As in Azerbaijan and much of the post-Soviet space, state agencies continue to monitor and control religious observance, allowing them to stamp out any signs of independent religious practice.²⁸ Indeed, in Turkmenistan, the development of the Turkmenbashi Ruhy Mosque was accompanied by a brutal repression of religious practice at the smaller scale, which included the systematic demolition of numerous mosques in 2004, the year of its opening.²⁹ These clamp-downs

on independent practice have not subsided since then and, even within the new, sanctioned monumental mosques, the situation in Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan parallels what Alima Bissenova terms ‘the étatisation of Islam’ in Kazakhstan. In the capital’s equally monumental Hazret Sultan Mosque, opened in 2012, she shows how state-controlled sermons and prayer patterns are used by political authorities to turn the mosque into ‘a state ideological apparatus’.³⁰

Altogether, these practices within and beyond the monumental mosques of Central Asia indicate that they do not just serve the material interests of elites but also operate as rhetorical foil to advance official identity narratives about being ‘defenders’ of Islam. This narrative both entrenches and normalizes the state’s control on religious practice. And through their monumental size and opulent display of the authorities’ ‘sacred authority’, the region’s iconic mosques work to amplify and privilege the state’s vision of Islam and practice. Like any monument, they are designed to both focalize and broadcast the state’s message – allegedly one of tolerance and support of Islam and local Muslim communities – though ultimately diverting attention from smaller scale suppressions of religious freedom.

The Arabian Peninsula

Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque (UAE)

The Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque was opened in the UAE’s capital, Abu Dhabi, in 2007 after 11 years of construction and at the cost of US\$545m. With a 40,000-person capacity (in the prayer hall and courtyards), it is one of the largest mosques in the world. It is also one of the most lavishly adorned mosques, including extraordinary Swarovski-crystal chandeliers, the world’s largest carpet, a rich marble exterior, and myriad architectural accouterments from all over the world. The international sourcing of the mosque’s ornamentation was intentional, said to illustrate Sheikh Zayed’s deep commitment to internationalism. The mosque’s website explains that the UAE founder’s commitment to diversity is ‘personified in Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, a majestic marvel that reveals a spectrum of architectural splendors formulating a harmonious unity between different Islamic architectural schools’.³¹ In this text and elsewhere, visitors are enjoined to interpret the site’s many architectural components as exemplary of nationalist ideals of the United Arab Emirates, highlighting ‘peace’, ‘tolerance’, ‘diversity’, ‘progress’, and the ‘nation’s vitality’ as traits and values exemplified by Sheikh Zayed, which the authors set up in marked contrast to ‘fanaticism or extremism’.

As with Niyazov’s eponymous mosque in Turkmenistan, the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque hosts the leader’s mausoleum nearby. Helping to sacralize his image, the mausoleum does so quietly: pictures are forbidden and there are no rituals of commemoration that mark other monumental mausoleums around the world, such as Lenin’s in Moscow or Atatürk’s in Ankara. Yet despite all the solemnity that is intended for the site, it is one of the UAE’s most visited tourist sites and it is constantly bustling with large tour groups from all over the world (Figure 3). Foreign visitors rarely glimpse Zayed’s mausoleum, but the message is nonetheless clear that the site commemorates the Emirati leader’s vision, values, and nationalist ideals. The opulence of the site is also a clear statement about the wealth of the UAE. The country’s oil-based economic prosperity is often associated with Sheikh Zayed’s early acumen, but the image of a land of excess and luxury is constantly on display in the country’s tourist industry. These worldly delights also form an important element of the appeal of the Grand Mosque, which stands out as a sparkling gem in the desert.³²

Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque (Oman)

Built from 300,000 tons of Indian sandstone, the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque was opened in Oman’s capital, Muscat, in 2001, after the leader’s initial directive for the project in 1992. The



Figure 3. A group of Southeast Asian tourists at the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, Abu Dhabi, UAE. Source: Natalie Koch, December 2014.

mosque can hold up to 20,000 people, with its combined indoor and courtyard capacity. It bears the name of Sultan Qaboos bin Said al Said, who has ruled as the country's absolute monarch since 1970, when he ousted his father, Sultan Said bin Taimur. Sultan Qaboos has concentrated nearly all political, military, and economic decision making in his own hands, and nationalist celebrations are ultimately celebrations of his person: Oman's National Day holiday (18 November) is the Sultan's birthday, while Renaissance Day (23 July) marks the first day of his reign. Ultimately, the Omani national ideology that Sultan Qaboos has promoted aims at legitimizing his highly centralized authority. Much of his legitimacy is derived from the modernization campaign he set in motion on assuming power, which he funded through the country's revenues from oil extraction that began only in 1967. As in many nondemocratic states, authorities feared that other forces could use religion to challenge the regime, so they never wanted to make Islam a major card in this effort to legitimize his power.

Nevertheless, Islam as a part of local identity is constantly emphasized in official narratives, which fuses the leader's personal authority, nationality, and religion. The Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque exemplifies this trend. It is described as a 'personal gift' to the 'nation' to mark Sultan Qaboos' 30th year of reigning over Oman (although it was only completed a year after that anniversary in 2000). Architecturally, it is also positioned as a symbol of a uniquely Omani Islam,

according a special place to local history in its built form. The edge of its inside court is adorned with niches not only honoring ancient Islamic cultures and civilizations (Iran, Syria, Andalusia, Central Asia, and others) but also situating Oman as one of the region's great empires.³³ In addition to celebrating past glory, the Grand Mosque's planners sought new glory by aiming for world records. When it opened, it held the world record for the largest hand-woven carpet, which was produced by Iran Carpet Company on the special order of the Diwan of the Royal Court of the Sultanate. It was surpassed in 2007, however, by the Sheikh Zayed Mosque's carpet, which was produced by the same Iranian company.³⁴

Like the other mosques considered so far, these superlatives are a way to achieve global recognition as a means of glorifying their leaders – in this case, the ostensibly 'enlightened' rule of a Sultan who has held firmly to his absolute authority for over 46 years. Taken together with the emphasis on superlatives, the architectural design of the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque can be understood as a way for local leaders to underscore the ideological narratives about an equally 'modern' understanding of Islam and Omani national identity promoted the Sultan. Simultaneously emphasizing modernization and an outward orientation, the mosque becomes a key site for Sultan Qaboos' religiously infused identity narrative that can broadcast his own sacred authority and his firm commitment to remaining rooted in national and religious values. The mosque's symbolic value thus extends well beyond that of any religious site found in the country but serves as a monument to Sultan Qaboos and his paternalistic vision for progress and faith-based nationalist ideals in Oman.

Southeast Asia

Omar Ali Saifuddin Mosque (Brunei)

The Omar Ali Saifuddin Mosque (Figure 4) was built by the 28th Sultan of Brunei, who ruled from 1950 to 1967. Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin III was very active in the construction of mosques in Brunei and would be nicknamed '*Arkitek Brunei moden*', the 'Architect of modern Brunei', and the eponymous mosque became one of the icons of this work. Completed in 1958, it was built strategically on an artificial lagoon between the water-based settlement of Kampong Ayer (Water village) and modern urban areas, and oriented toward the Kiblat (Mecca).³⁵ The new mosque was built on the remnants of the Marbut Pak Tunggal Mosque, which was itself the first mosque on dry land during the British Protectorate era in the early 20th century, when water-based settlements were actively being moved to dry land.

In addition to being built on land, a nontraditional practice for Bruneians, part of what made Sultan Omar's project so spectacular at the time was the fact that Brunei's capital lacked a proper mosque prior to its completion. The country's previous infirm Masjid Marbut Pak Tunggal had been destroyed during World War II. It was replaced only by a temporary wooden structure with a thatched palm-leaf roof, which was called Masjid Kajang.³⁶ This makeshift mosque would only fit 500 congregants and could not accommodate the needs of the Muslim populace. Nor did it reflect the country's increasing wealth coming from oil and gas resources. However, the new Omar Ali Saifuddin Mosque certainly did.

The structure is opulent to the extreme, including a dome covered in pure gold, high minaret, and chattris gives out its monumental looks following the Indo-Islam trend of structures and many other accouterments imported from abroad, including marble from Italy, granite from Shanghai, crystal chandeliers from England, and carpets from Saudi Arabia. It incorporates both Mogul and Malay architectural features but was actually designed by the Italian architect, Cavalieri Nolli. Despite the heavy influence of foreign architecture, there are some elements of the mosque that



Figure 4. Omar Ali Saifuddin Mosque, Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei.
Source: Natalie Koch, December 2015.

retain its native local design. For example, the exterior columns resemble a thick rope locally known as *'kalat.'* These columns are traditionally found in the building called the *'Lapau'* (where royal functions are held), and are here borrowed and incorporated into the mosque to give it a 'local' flavor.³⁷ This blend of vernacular architectural forms with what Sarah Moser refers to as 'Islamic fantasy architecture' (i.e. inspired by exoticized Middle Eastern architectural imaginary)³⁸ and is not uncommon in mosques around the world. However, the vernacular takes on special significance in the mosques-as-monuments, such as Brunei's Omar Ali Saifuddin Mosque, because of their role as icons that reflect *and* inscribe a particular image of national uniqueness.

As with the other mosques considered here, the Omar Ali Saifuddin Mosque served as an important way for the late Sultan Omar to articulate and focalize his 'sacred authority'. When he became Sultan in June 1950, he had already taken a prominent role in Brunei's religious administration as the chairman of the Mohammedan Religious Advisors, a council formed in 1948 to consider the country's religious affairs. Overall, Sultan Omar positioned himself as a leading advocate for the Islamicization of Brunei and he was responsible for having Islam enshrined as the official religion of Brunei in the 1959 Constitution. Not only did he supervise the construction of his own eponymous mosques, but he also encouraged their development elsewhere in the country. The Sultan was no longer in power when the country gained full independence from Britain, marked by the ruling Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah's Proclamation of Independence on 1 January 1984, but his effort to blend Bruneian national identity with Islam had lasting effects.

Sultan Hassanal's declaration articulated what was to become the new country's national philosophy, *Melayu Islam Beraja* (Malay Islamic Monarchy). Rooted in precolonial identity narratives, *Melayu Islam Beraja* encompasses certain cultural and religious values, ethics, and norms that are said to shape Bruneian life. It also outlines a strong relationship between the state and religion, specifying the country's adherence to the Sunni branch of Islam and that the monarchy is trusted by God to undertake the leadership to lead the people.³⁹ The country's monumental Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin Mosque took on even greater symbolic significance, on the eve of Sultan Hassanal's Proclamation of Independence, which he read just outside the mosque at 12:01 a.m. This was followed by the chant of *'Allahu Akbar'* ('God is almighty') by Begawan Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin himself. With crowds of worshippers flocking to the site for the event and for prayers at

the mosque, its symbolic centrality became forever entrenched in the new nation's history.⁴⁰ Today, it remains one of the most visible icons symbolizing and focalizing the central role of Islam in Brunei.

Istiqlal Mosque (Indonesia)

With a 120,000-person capacity, the Istiqlal Mosque's superlative claim is to being the largest mosque in Southeast Asia. It opened in Indonesia's capital, Jakarta, in 1978. '*Istiqlal*' means 'Independence' in Arabic and, indeed, the mosque commemorates Indonesia's 1945 independence from the Netherlands. The project was initially proposed shortly thereafter and approved by the first Indonesian president, Sukarno, in 1953. Sukarno was so interested in the mosque's shape that he had the construction committee appoint him 'technical chief supervisor'. He was especially particular about the mosque's siting, which he insisted be in the symbolic heart of the city, adjacent to the Merdeka Palace – the center of the Indonesian executive authority (then and still). Ultimately, the government chose the Wijaya Kusuma Park, which is an area linked to the Ciliwung River via a canal in the middle of the city and was the former site of now-ruined Dutch fortress.⁴¹ The two structures are situated at the edges of the large Merdeka Square, which has a tall National Monument obelisk at its center known as '*Monas*' (an Indonesian abbreviation for '*Monumen Nasional*'). The ceremonial beginning of the two Jakarta monuments was conducted within a week of each other: Sukarno laid the initial stones at the National Monument on 17 August 1961 and on 24 August at the Istiqlal Mosque.⁴² The development of these symbolic sites did not merely unfold side by side. Through the choice to locate the massive new mosque in the symbolic heart of the capital, they are temporally and spatially conjoined in the official identity narrative that weaves Islamic values into the essence of a new Indonesian national identity.

Sukarno was also keen to demonstrate the state's ostensible commitment to religious diversity through the monumental Istiqlal Mosque project. To do so, he wanted it be located near the city's impressive neo-Gothic Jakarta Cathedral. The choice of location has consistently been narrated as part of Sukarno's pluralistic narrative enshrined in the Pancasila, his Indonesian 'national philosophy'. Akin to Niyazov's *Ruhnama* in Turkmenistan (albeit more concise), Pancasila is said to constitute the foundation of Indonesian nationhood, with the five principles fusing socialist, nationalistic, and monotheistic ideals. Almost immediately, there was contention over the principle of '*KeTuhanan yang Maha Esa*', beginning with its translation, which ranges from simply 'Belief in God' to 'the Belief in Oneness of God' and 'the Belief in the One and Only God'.⁴³ For some, this has been interpreted as exemplary of Sukarno's professed commitment to religious diversity, while Islamic activists saw it as asserting an explicitly Muslim identity for Indonesia.⁴⁴ In any case, Sukarno's decision to place the prominent Istiqlal Mosque adjacent to the Jakarta Cathedral, itself seen as a symbol of colonial rule, was viewed with suspicion by some, who considered it a move to displace the cathedral's symbolic prominence in the religious landscape. All monuments or iconic structures are ultimately the result of competing aims, agendas, and identity narratives, so it would be too simplistic to accept one interpretation of the Pancasila's monotheism principle as it relates to the Istiqlal Mosque. But regardless of whether it was intended to 'outshine' the neighboring cathedral, it is clear from various elements of the monumental mosque that it is an important statement about a particular Islamic-inflected national identity in postcolonial Indonesia.

The Istiqlal Mosque was explicitly intended to be read through a national lens, which is apparent in the heavy use of nationally significant numbers in its architectural design, alongside more general forms of Islamic numeric symbolism. For example, the entryway to the main prayer hall has an 8-m-diameter dome, with the number 8 symbolizing the month of Indonesian independence, August. In the central prayer hall itself, the dome is 45 m in diameter to symbolize the country's

1945 proclamation of independence. A pool in the garden also boasts fountains that spout water 45 m high. While these examples pale in comparison to the extreme case of Niyazov engraving his belief in the *Ruhnama*'s supremacy over the Quran on his mosque's walls, they are small ways of writing nationalist claims into the very architecture of the mosque and claim the 'sacred authority' that this is imagined to endow. It also evinces the designers' understanding that nationalist values are, if not equivalent to religious values, at least worthy of being inscribed in the most sacred places of worship in the land. The Istiqlal Mosque thus became one of the most important venues to consecrate the newly defined and delineated nation on independence.

Discussion and conclusion

This article has traced a wide ranging set of case studies of 'mosques-as-monuments' in Central Asia, the Arabian Peninsula, and Southeast Asia. The six individual sites have many differences, but they also share important commonalities. Briefly noted at the outset of this article, we will elaborate on three of these common threads here. First, each mosque here was funded either by the state and was designed to broadcast a specific ideological narrative about the state, the nation, its founding fathers, and its values. To be sure, religious symbolism is present, and the mosques demonstrate the generally accepted architectural conventions of such a structure. However, as compared to other places of worship, these iconic mosques have a much stronger balance of nationalist or statist symbolism than prevails in other mosques. In some cases, we see that these mosques glorify the eponymous national leader (e.g. Turkmenbashi or Sultan Qaboos), while at other times, they symbolize certain nationalistically defined values like 'tolerance' and 'diversity' in the UAE, a 'strong state' and multiculturalism in Azerbaijan, or the Pancasila in Indonesia. Like more secular monuments, these nationalist and statist tropes simply take different forms according to the context and wishes of their planners: sometimes, they are allegorical representations, and other times, a statue of a leader is called for instead.

Considering their background together, it becomes apparent that these monumental mosques are common in emergent states after colonial or outside rule. With new authorities seeking to redefine themselves and their values in the era of independence, the mosques help to focalize identity narratives and index a new symbolic order, which is a hallmark of other nationalist monuments. In Southeast Asia, for example, Indonesia's Istiqlal Mosque is exemplary of the effort to construct a new, modern Islamic *and* national identity almost immediately on gaining independence. Insofar as they hold a privileged place in state-based identity narratives, monumental religious landscapes are inextricably connected to wider struggles to narrate 'the nation'. As such, these narratives are necessarily accompanied by certain silences. This is noted by Sarah Moser in the context of Malaysia: she highlights the fact that the master plan of the country's new administrative capital, Putrajaya, did not include any other sites of worship beside the city's central Putra Mosque. Also, the iconicity of monumental mosques like those considered here can mask a more diverse religious landscape, crowding out alternative identity narratives.⁴⁵ Indeed, what also makes these imposing and visually impressive religious icons so politically significant is that via their size and splendor, they strategically divert attention from that which they exclude. They concretize and monumentalize a *singular* narrative.

Related to these potentially competing nationalist identity narratives, the second commonality found in the six cases is that each mosque was designed with a strong focus on becoming an iconic architectural showpiece in the country's capital city. Many of them function as a major tourist attraction in their capitals. Mosques are an ideal means to monumentalize the spiritual and moral authority of their benefactors or those individuals or countries for which they are named. In contexts where many mosques have received state support, these 'state as client'

mosques built to honor the 'nation' or named for the nationalist 'founding father' take on a special significance: they are effectively national monuments designed to materially inscribe these nationalist ideals in the urban fabric. Although the legacy of these projects – as living sites for tourists and worshippers alike – is perhaps more significant than their conception, their initial design and the values they are said to represent are important to understand the role they play in social and political configurations in their specific contexts. For this reason, we see that many of the mosques here stand apart architecturally, physically, and socially – not just in their monumentality but also in terms of their special, privileged location within the capital city and its most prestigious corners.

This leads us to the third commonality we would emphasize: that each mosque represents a stark contrast to other places of worship within its national or regional context, based on its size, siting, and/or the resources and prestige invested in its construction. In most of the cases, state financing far outstrips any other investments in their countries' religious landscapes. And in one way or another, these mosques are built in isolation, further from residential areas and designed to stand alone in the city's symbolic centers, like the Istiqlal Mosque adjacent to Jakarta's central square and the country's National Monument, or the Turkmenbashi Ruhy Mosque and the Sheikh Zayed Mosque being far from their capital's city centers where their opulence gleams even more brightly with their barren desert backdrops. That they are thus set apart from the natural flow of congregants is the point: they are not 'everyday' sites for 'everyday' people but iconic monuments.

The monumental mosques' social and political significance is especially important in contexts where Islam is viewed with no small degree of suspicion. Political elites in nondemocratic states often view religion as a potential challenge to their unitary power, but the degree of state control over religious practice is especially obvious in post-Soviet Central Asia. Thus, in Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, the monumentality of the region's grand new mosques works strategically to buttress state-based elites' claims that they support religious freedom, while simultaneously cracking down on smaller, more organic or democratic places of worship, or religious practice outside the state's managerial control. And here, symbolic siting of a monumental mosque is key: by putting on display *in the country's most symbolic centers*, the state's false claims to protecting free worship are to be strategically deflected.

However, through the inter-Asian comparative approach taken here, it becomes vividly clear that just because a religious site may appear to stand apart from other sites where nationalist and statist identity narratives are inscribed, some can also function primarily as *politicized monuments*. Centrally, the inter-Asian lens helps us to de-exceptionalize monumental mosques by acknowledging the 'ambivalent' or 'kaleidoscopic' relationship between nationalism and religion, while simultaneously shedding light on their common role in political leaders' efforts to narrate and claim 'sacred authority'. By examining how this authority is narrated and *where*, political and cultural geographers are well positioned to provide a more contextually aware account of the varied political effects of how the relationship between religion and nationalism is narrated and contested. These competing truths and myths are, after all, on display for the whole world – and monumentally so.

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Notes

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Author biographies

Natalie Koch is associate professor in the Department of Geography at Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs. She is a political and urban geographer focused on geopolitics, nationalism, authoritarianism, and urban landscapes in the post-Soviet space and the Arabian Peninsula.

Anar Valiyev is assistant professor at ADA University in Baku, Azerbaijan. Holding a PhD from the University of Louisville and an MA from Indiana University-Bloomington, he conducts research on urban studies and politics in the post-Soviet space. He was a Fulbright visiting scholar at SAIS, Johns Hopkins University from 2016-17.

Khairul Hazmi Zaini is an independent scholar with a degree in Geography and Development from Universiti Brunei Darussalam. His research focuses on urbanism and urban morphology, with a special interest in understanding Islamic urbanism. His other work is on mosques and monumentality in Brunei, Borneo, and other Southeast Asian contexts.