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Why Does a Secular State Use Religion for Nation Branding? The Dilemma of Islamic Identity in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan

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Abstract

This study analyzes why Kazakhstan, as a secular country, uses monumental mosque architecture as a strategic instrument for building its post-Soviet nation brand. The architecture integrates Islamic elements with Kazakh cultural values and monumental symbolism. This strategy is further supported by various Islamic activities at the international level. This is done by constructing an Islamic identity in the midst of politically dominant secular forces. This is an interesting dilemma to examine considering that secularism does not fundamentally make religion the legitimacy of power. The research uses an explanatory qualitative approach through field observation and semi-structured interviews at the Hazrat Sultan Mosque, Abu Nasr al-Farabi Mosque, and Astana Grand Mosque. The analysis was carried out using the perspectives of nation branding and soft power. The results of the study show that the mosque's architecture serves as a symbolic infrastructure that connects Islamic heritage, Kazakh national identity, and Kazakhstan's international image as a secular country with a moderate Muslim majority. This strategy allows the state to maintain the principles of constitutional secularism while utilizing religious symbols to strengthen domestic legitimacy and enhance its global reputation.

Keywords

Nation Branding; Islamic Identity; Mosque Architecture; Kazakhstan; Secularism

Abstrak

Penelitian ini menganalisis mengapa Kazakhstan, sebagai negara sekuler, menggunakan arsitektur masjid bersejarah, terintegrasi dengan nilai budaya kazakh dan monumental serta berbagai kegiatan islam di level global sebagai instrumen strategis dalam membangun nation branding pasca-Soviet. Hal ini dilakukan dengan mengkonstruksi identitas islam ditengah kekuatan sekuler yang dominan secara politik. Ini adalah dilema yang menarik untuk dikaji mengingat sekularisme pada dasarnya tidak menjadikan agama sebagai legitimasi kekuasaan. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif eksplanatif melalui observasi lapangan dan wawancara semi-terstruktur di Masjid Hazrat Sultan, Masjid Abu Nasr al-Farabi,

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dan Astana Grand Mosque. Analisis dilakukan menggunakan perspektif nation branding dan soft power. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa arsitektur masjid berfungsi sebagai infrastruktur simbolik yang menghubungkan warisan Islam, identitas nasional Kazakh, dan citra internasional Kazakhstan sebagai negara sekuler dengan mayoritas Muslim moderat. Strategi ini memungkinkan negara mempertahankan prinsip sekularisme konstitusional sekaligus memanfaatkan simbol agama untuk memperkuat legitimasi domestik dan meningkatkan reputasi global.

Kata Kunci
Nation Branding; Identitas Islam; Arsitektur Masjid; Kazakhstan; Sekularisme

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Introduction

The dissolution of the Soviet Union marked a profound turning point for the newly independent states of Central Asia. Beyond political sovereignty, independence required these states to reconstruct collective identities capable of legitimizing new political orders and distinguishing them from the Soviet past. In Kazakhstan, this process involved rearticulating historical narratives, cultural symbols, and religious traditions into a coherent national identity(Cummings, 2005; Laruelle, 2014). As a multiethnic and constitutionally secular state, Kazakhstan faced the challenge of integrating Islamic heritage into nation-building without undermining its commitment to religious pluralism and state secularism.

Islam occupies a central place in Kazakhstan's historical and cultural development. Introduced through the *Silk Road* and shaped by the teachings of Sunni Hanafi scholars and Sufi figures such as Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, Islam has long formed part of the symbolic foundations of Kazakh identity (*Khoja Ahmed Yasawi (Kazakhstan) No 1103*, 2002;). During the Soviet period, however, religious institutions were heavily regulated, mosques were closed, and Islamic practice was confined to the private sphere. Following independence in 1991, the state gradually restored religious freedom and facilitated a visible revival of Islam in public life, while preserving a secular constitutional order (Omelicheva, 2016; Tungatarov & Zholdybalin, 2025).

Public representations of Islam play an important role in shaping social cohesion and intercultural relations. This perspective is relevant to Kazakhstan, where monumental mosque architecture is used to communicate Islam as a symbol of moderation and national harmony (Abdillah & Putri, 2022). One of the clearest indicators of this revival is the dramatic growth in the number of mosques. From fewer

than one hundred functioning mosques at the beginning of independence, Kazakhstan now hosts more than 2,700 mosques nationwide under the supervision of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan, commonly known as the Muftiate of Kazakhstan. This institutional expansion demonstrates that Islam has re-emerged not merely as a private faith, but as an increasingly visible component of national culture and public representation (Rakhbayev et al., 2019).

The relocation of the national capital from Almaty to Astana in 1997 accelerated this symbolic transformation. Astana was conceived as a planned capital designed to communicate the state's aspirations through monumental architecture and urban symbolism. Scholars have shown that the city's architectural landscape functions as a political language through which Kazakhstan narrates modernity, sovereignty, and legitimacy (Koch, 2010). Iconic structures such as the Bayterek Tower, the Palace of Peace and Reconciliation, and the Kazakh Eli Monument exemplify the state's use of architecture to construct and project national identity.

Within this symbolic urban landscape, monumental mosques occupy a particularly significant role. The Hazrat Sultan Mosque, inaugurated in 2012, the Abu Nasr al-Farabi Mosque, originally opened in 2005, and the Astana Grand Mosque, inaugurated in 2022 as the largest mosque in Central Asia, represent more than religious buildings. Their monumental scale, strategic locations, and incorporation of both Islamic and Kazakh motifs suggest that they function as state-sponsored symbols linking religious heritage with national identity and international image.

This phenomenon can be understood through the concept of nation branding. According to Simon Anholt (2007), nation branding refers to strategic efforts by states to shape international perceptions through symbols, narratives, and public diplomacy. Similarly, Nation branding involves the deliberate management of symbols, cultural assets, and narratives to build a distinctive national reputation (Dinnie, 2008). In line with this concept, Joseph S. Nye (2004) introduced the concept of soft power, namely the ability of states to influence others through attraction, values, and culture rather than coercion. Monumental architecture, national landmarks, and religious symbols can therefore serve as instruments of symbolic communication and international image-building (Aronczyk, 2013). From a constructivist perspective, state identity is socially constructed through interaction, discourse, and symbolic representation (Wendt, 1999). In this context, mosque architecture can be understood as a material expression through which Kazakhstan constructs and communicates its national identity.

Kazakhstan's nation-building project is rooted in a long historical process that combines collective memory, elite narratives, and symbolic reconstruction (Zholdybalin, 2025). Contemporary mosque architecture should therefore be understood as part of a broader effort to materialize and communicate national identity. In Kazakhstan, the use of mosque architecture for symbolic purposes is particularly significant because it occurs within a secular state framework. Rather than establishing Islam as the basis of state authority, the government selectively incorporates Islamic symbols into national narratives to project an image of historical

continuity, moderation, and tolerance. This strategy aligns with Kazakhstan's broader diplomatic initiatives, including the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, which positions the country as a global platform for interfaith dialogue and peaceful coexistence (Tungatarov & Zholdybalin, 2025).

The symbolic use of Islam also draws on the legacy of influential figures in Islamic civilization. The naming of the Abu Nasr al-Farabi Mosque, for example, invokes one of the most important thinkers in Islamic political philosophy, whose work connected religion, ethics, and governance in the ideal virtuous city (Parens, 2002). This historical reference reinforces the state's attempt to anchor contemporary identity in a broader intellectual and civilizational tradition.

Beyond the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, Kazakhstan has increasingly positioned itself as a regional hub for international Islamic and interfaith initiatives. In recent years, Astana and Almaty have hosted a range of global religious programs, including international Qur'an recitation competitions, academic conferences on Islamic civilization and contemporary theology, and multifaith forums addressing religious tolerance and conflict prevention. These initiatives are organized through collaboration between the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan, the Committee for Religious Affairs, and international partners such as the Muslim Council of Elders, Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, and Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. Through these recurring events, Kazakhstan projects itself not only as a secular state with a Muslim-majority population, but also as a facilitator of global Islamic dialogue and religious moderation. Monumental mosques such as the Astana Grand Mosque provide the architectural setting for many of these activities, reinforcing their role as symbolic infrastructures that connect domestic identity construction with international public diplomacy (Asagiri, 2023).

Previous scholarship has examined Islam's revival in Central Asia, state regulation of religion, and Kazakhstan's symbolic politics (Kikimbayev et al., 2021; Zhandossova & Seitakhmetova, 2025). Astana's urban development and monumental architecture as instruments of political legitimacy and national identity formation (Koch, 2013; Massyrova et al., 2015). Meanwhile, Kikimbayev et al. (2021) examined mosques in post-Soviet Kazakhstan by focusing on mosque construction, religious regulation, and the role of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan. There is also a Research has also examined the adaptation of Islamic architectural traditions to contemporary urban and cultural contexts in Kazakhstan (Galimzhanova et al., 2020). However, these studies generally examine urban architecture, religious regulation, mosque construction, or Islamic revival separately. Limited attention has been paid to how monumental mosque architecture specifically functions as an instrument of nation branding and identity construction in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. In particular, existing research has rarely examined the intersection between religious architecture, Islamic identity, and nation branding as part of a broader strategy for projecting Kazakhstan's national identity and international image.

This study addresses that gap by examining why Kazakhstan employs monumental mosque architecture as a strategic instrument in constructing and projecting its national brand. It argues that mosque architecture in Astana performs a multi-layered function: it reconstructs Islamic identity after Soviet secularism, negotiates the relationship between religion and state, and projects Kazakhstan internationally as a modern, moderate, and culturally rooted Muslim-majority nation. Accordingly, this study seeks to address the following research question: Why does a secular state use monumental mosque architecture as a strategic instrument for nation branding through Islamic identity in post-Soviet Kazakhstan? By answering this question, the study contributes to the literature on nation branding, post-Soviet identity formation, and the politics of religious architecture. It demonstrates that in Kazakhstan, monumental mosques are not merely places of worship, but symbolic infrastructures through which the state communicates historical continuity, domestic legitimacy, and international aspirations.

Method

This study employs a qualitative explanatory design to examine why the government of Kazakhstan utilizes monumental mosque architecture as a strategic instrument of nation branding within a constitutionally secular state. Qualitative research is appropriate for examining meanings, interpretations, social processes, and symbolic practices that cannot be adequately understood through numerical measurement alone (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). A qualitative explanatory approach is therefore appropriate because the objective of this research is not merely to describe architectural features or religious activities, but to explain the political meanings, identity narratives, and branding strategies embedded in religious spaces (Yin, 2018). In this study, mosque architecture is understood as a symbolic and political artifact through which state narratives about Islam, nationhood, and international image are communicated.

The research employs a comparative case study design focusing on three major mosques in Astana: the Hazrat Sultan Mosque, the Abu Nasr al-Farabi Mosque, and the Astana Grand Mosque. A case study approach is particularly useful for investigating contemporary phenomena within their real-world contexts and for examining complex relationships between social actors, institutions, and symbolic practices (Yin, 2018). These cases were selected purposively because each represents a distinct phase and scale of Islamic representation in Kazakhstan's post-Soviet development.

The Hazrat Sultan Mosque symbolizes institutional Islam and the early post-independence revival of religion. The Abu Nasr al-Farabi Mosque reflects community-based religious practice and transnational Islamic connections. The Astana Grand Mosque, inaugurated in 2022, represents the most explicit articulation of monumental Islam as a component of Kazakhstan's global image and diplomatic

projection. Examining these three sites enables cross-case comparison of how architecture operates simultaneously as a religious, cultural, and political instrument.

Data were collected during fieldwork in Astana between February and March 2026 through three complementary techniques: participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. The use of multiple qualitative data collection techniques enables researchers to examine social phenomena from different perspectives and strengthens the contextual understanding of the cases under investigation. Participant observation was conducted inside and around the three mosques during both ordinary prayer times and the month of Ramadan. Participant observation enables researchers to examine social practices, spatial interactions, and symbolic meanings within their natural.

The study conducted semi structured in-depth interviews with key informants selected for their institutional roles and experiential knowledge. Informants included: 1. Mosque imams and administrators; 2. Representatives of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan (Muftiate); 3. Official mosque guides and tour coordinators; 4. Local worshippers; 5. Diplomatic representatives familiar with Kazakhstan's image-building strategy.

Key interviewees included Vice-Imam Mahmud Qasym at Hazrat Sultan Mosque, Imam Altynbek at Abu Nasr al-Farabi Mosque, Yernar (secretary to the Grand Imam and official guide at Astana Grand Mosque), and an Indonesian diplomat stationed in Astana. Interviews explored perceptions of mosque symbolism, state-religion relations, the role of architecture in public diplomacy, and the significance of Islam in Kazakhstan's national narrative. Interviews were conducted in English, Arabic, and Bahasa Indonesia, depending on the informant's preference. When necessary, responses were translated and cross-checked to preserve conceptual accuracy.

To contextualize the field findings, this study analyzed constitutional provisions, policy documents, speeches by state officials, publications from the Muftiate, and official materials from the Akorda Presidential Press Service. Secondary academic literature on nation branding, secularism, political architecture, and Islam in Central Asia was also reviewed to situate the empirical findings within broader theoretical debates. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Interview transcripts, field notes, and documentary materials were coded iteratively to identify recurring themes.

The coding process generated five principal analytical categories: 1. Mosque architecture as a nation branding instrument; 2. Negotiated secularism; 3. Historical continuity and Islamic legitimacy; 4. Soft power and cultural diplomacy; 5. Multi-scalar representations of Islam.

The analysis was informed by constructivist theory, which views national identity as socially constructed through symbols, discourse, and institutional practices (Wendt, 1999). Concepts of nation branding (Anholt, 2007) and soft power (Nye, 2004) were used to interpret how monumental religious architecture contributes to Kazakhstan's domestic identity construction and international image projection.

To enhance credibility, the study employed triangulation by comparing evidence from observations, interviews, and documentary sources. Cross-case comparison among the three mosques strengthened analytical rigor by identifying both shared patterns and distinctive features. Member checking was conducted informally during interviews to confirm the researcher's interpretations of key statements and institutional narratives.

All informants participated voluntarily and were informed about the academic purpose and scope of the research before the interviews were conducted. Verbal informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to the interview. Informants were given the option to remain anonymous or to be identified by name and institutional position. The informants whose names and positions are mentioned in this study explicitly granted permission for their identities and institutional affiliations to be disclosed in the manuscript, particularly because they were interviewed in their official capacities. Other participants who preferred anonymity are not identified by name. The research also respected local religious norms and institutional regulations during observation, interviews, and documentation inside mosque premises.

Discussion

Monumental Mosque Architecture as a Nation Branding Instrument

The relocation of Kazakhstan's capital from Almaty to Astana in 1997 reflected the importance of constructing a new symbolic urban space to represent the country's modernity and national aspirations (Koch, 2010). Since its establishment as the new capital, the development of Astana has been closely tied to state- and nation-building objectives, with monumental architecture functioning as a key instrument for projecting Kazakhstan's national identity to both domestic and international audiences (Koch, 2013). Within this broader urban and political context, the findings confirm that mosque architecture in Astana functions as part of Kazakhstan's nation-branding strategy (Dinnie, 2008; Anholt, 2007). Through monumental design, strategic urban placement, and cultural symbolism, mosques serve as instruments of soft power and international image-making (Nye, 2004; Anholt, 2007).

Unlike Gulf models that emphasize luxury or Turkish models that emphasize imperial nostalgia, Kazakhstan's mosque architecture is oriented toward post-Soviet identity reconstruction. It combines Islamic symbolism, local heritage, and modern national branding in a distinct representational framework. Ramankulova (2020) argues that nation branding in Kazakhstan functions not only to enhance the country's international image but also to reinforce domestic nation-building. In this context, monumental mosques project Kazakhstan as a modern, peaceful, and culturally rooted Muslim-majority state.

The findings demonstrate that monumental mosque architecture in Astana functions as a strategic instrument of Kazakhstan's nation branding. Rather than serving solely as places of worship, the Hazrat Sultan Mosque, Abu Nasr al-Farabi

Mosque, and Astana Grand Mosque operate as highly visible symbols that communicate a specific national image to domestic and international audiences. The declining level of public trust in religious organizations suggests that the state increasingly relies on monumental architecture to materialize Islamic legitimacy in a more visible and politically controllable form (Khamzina et al., 2026).

This finding is consistent with Kikimbayev et al. (2021), who argue that mosques in post-Soviet Kazakhstan have evolved into important public institutions whose construction and regulation are increasingly standardized under the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan. This institutionalization reinforces the role of mosques not only as religious facilities but also as state-recognized symbolic spaces.

In the literature on nation branding, states construct reputations by projecting selected cultural, political, and historical attributes that distinguish them from other countries (Insebayeva & Insebayeva, 2022; Anholt, 2007). In Kazakhstan's case, mosque architecture is used to project an image of the country as a modern, moderate, and culturally rooted Muslim-majority state. These buildings combine Islamic symbolism with local Kazakh motifs, thereby visually integrating religion and nationhood. According to Dinnie (2008), nation branding involves the deliberate management of symbols, narratives, and cultural assets to shape a country's reputation and identity(Dinnie, 2008).

Field observations indicate that each mosque occupies a prominent position within Astana's urban landscape. Their monumental scale, aesthetic sophistication, and strategic placement ensure high visibility. Architecture in Astana is deliberately employed to communicate narratives of state legitimacy and national identity (Massyrova et al., 2015). Similarly, Koch (2010) argues that monumental buildings in Astana serve as instruments through which the state materializes political meaning.

The Astana Grand Mosque offers the clearest example. As the largest mosque in Central Asia, it functions as a landmark that symbolizes Kazakhstan's ambition to position itself as a leading center of Islamic culture in the region. Its monumental design transforms religious architecture into a branding asset that reinforces national prestige and global visibility. As noted by Yernar, secretary to the Grand Imam of the Astana Grand Mosque, "this mosque was designed to represent Kazakhstan to the world." This statement indicates that the mosque was conceived not merely as a place of worship, but as a symbolic structure intended to communicate Kazakhstan's image to international audiences (Yernar, personal communication, March 7, 2026).

Kazakhstan's strategy resembles broader international practices in which religious architecture is used for symbolic state projection. In the United Arab Emirates, the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque functions as a global symbol of prestige and openness, while in Turkey the Çamlıca Mosque reflects Ottoman-Islamic revivalism. Kazakhstan differs by combining Islamic symbolism with post-Soviet identity reconstruction and indigenous Kazakh cultural motifs.

Figure 1: Exterior panorama of Astana Grand Mosque showing its monumental scale and strategic urban setting.



Source: Results of documentation and field observations (2026).

Mosque architectural symbolism communicates both sacred and political meanings through spatial forms, geometry, and visual metaphors. The design of Kazakhstan's monumental mosques therefore functions not merely as an aesthetic expression but also as a symbolic language that conveys national identity, historical continuity, and religious legitimacy (Astakhova, 2020). Furthermore, Kazakhstan's contemporary architecture reflects a continuous synthesis of tradition and innovation, combining indigenous forms with global influences.

Architecturally, the mosque integrates Islamic symbolism with Kazakh national identity in a highly deliberate manner. The main dome, one of the largest in the region, is framed by four monumental minarets rising approximately 130 meters. According to mosque guides, this number symbolically corresponds to the more than 130 ethnic groups living in Kazakhstan, transforming the verticality of the mosque into an architectural metaphor for national plurality and interethnic coexistence. In this sense, the minarets do not function solely as religious markers, but as visual statements of Kazakhstan's state narrative of unity in diversity (Moralı & Topsakal, 2025).

Negotiating Secularism through Islamic Symbolism

Although Kazakhstan is constitutionally a secular state, the findings reveal that Islamic symbolism is actively incorporated into the country's official identity construction. This reflects a form of negotiated secularism in which religion is not adopted as a formal state ideology but is selectively mobilized as a cultural and symbolic resource (Insebayeva & Insebayeva, 2022; Tuiganov, 2023). Although approximately 88 percent of Kazakhstan's population identifies as religious, only about one-quarter actively practices their faith, indicating that religion functions largely as a cultural marker rather than solely as a matter of personal devotion (Khamzina et al., 2026).

A representative of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan from Head of Mosque Affairs of Muftiat Mr. Zhappasbayev Marat and Religious Englightenment Sector of Muftiat Mr. Tozhin Zhanabay explained that Kazakhstan remains a secular state while recognizing religion as an integral part of national culture. This perspective illustrates how Islamic symbolism is incorporated into public life without altering the constitutional commitment to secular governance (Zhappasbayev and Tozhin, personal communication, April 7, 2026).

Interviews with representatives of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan (Muftiate of Kazakhstan) indicate that mosques are viewed as important institutions for preserving moral values, cultural heritage, and social cohesion. At the same time, the state maintains constitutional neutrality by allowing religious institutions to operate formally outside direct state administration. This institutional relationship was explicitly acknowledged by the Supreme Mufti of Kazakhstan, Nauryzbai Kazhy Taganuly, who stated that the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan works closely with the government to "strengthen interfaith harmony and tolerance in society" while reinforcing "the secular foundations of the state" (Boltuc, 2023). This statement demonstrates that Islam is not positioned as an alternative to secular governance, but as a state-recognized partner in maintaining social cohesion and national stability. The construction of monumental mosques in Astana should therefore be understood within this broader framework of managed religious visibility and state-guided Islamic representation.

This arrangement allows Kazakhstan to balance two objectives. Domestically, it responds to the religious aspirations of a Muslim-majority population. Internationally, it maintains an image of political moderation and interreligious tolerance. As Brubaker (2012) notes, religion and nationalism often intersect not through doctrinal fusion but through symbolic incorporation.

Monumental mosques in Kazakhstan also illustrate how religious symbols operate within contested public spaces. Spatial analysis reveals how secularism is localized and negotiated through the regulation and visibility of religious symbols in urban environments. In the Kazakh context, the construction of grand mosques in prominent locations demonstrates that Islamic symbols are not excluded from the public sphere; rather, they are selectively incorporated into state-managed spaces. This process allows the government to present Islam as a legitimate component of national identity while maintaining institutional control over its public expression (Müller et al., 2021).

The symbolic integration of Islam is evident in architectural details. At the Astana Grand Mosque, blue domes reflect the national flag, while the shanyrak motif an emblem appearing on Kazakhstan's state symboln is embedded into the interior design. These elements visually express the coexistence of secular statehood and Islamic cultural identity. This pattern reflects a broader post-Soviet trend in Central Asia. States such as Kazakhstan have maintained secular political institutions while simultaneously supporting the construction of mosques and other religious symbols as part of their nation-building strategies. In this context, the visibil-

ity of Islam in Astana's monumental mosques does not indicate a departure from secularism, but rather illustrates how religious symbolism is selectively incorporated into the public sphere to reinforce national identity and state legitimacy (Byerdimurat, 2024).

Figure 2: Interior dome of Astana Grand Mosque highlighting the shanyrak motif and blue color symbolism.



Source: Results of Researchers' Observations at the Grand Mosque Mosque Astana, Kazakhstan (2026).

Kazakhstan's secularism does not imply the exclusion of religion from public life. Instead, as a model in which secularism functions as an element of state identity and religion is incorporated into public policy through a controlled process of politicization. In this framework, Islam is neither marginalized nor allowed to dominate the political sphere. Rather, the state selectively promotes religious symbols that reinforce national cohesion and legitimacy. The construction of monumental mosques therefore represents a form of state politicization of religion, in which Islamic architecture is used to communicate cultural authenticity while preserving the constitutional foundations of a secular state (Tuiganov, 2023).

The findings also challenge binary understandings of secularism and religiosity (Casanova, 1994; Asad, 2003). Kazakhstan's secularism does not entail the exclusion of religion from public space. Rather, it operates through a negotiated model in which religion remains institutionally distinct yet symbolically integrated into national identity. Reporting from galim, J. (2020) Thou Shalt have No. other gods before me: Why Governments discriminate against religious minorities. Cambridge University Press explains that the relationship between state and religion is very related to each other, especially from how the form of sustainability of the political system is applied (Fox, 2020).

This negotiated relationship is institutionally mediated through the Muftiat of Kazakhstan, which functions as the formal religious authority responsible for overseeing mosque administration, religious education, and doctrinal coordination. Interviews with Muftiat representatives suggest that this institutional arrangement

allows the state to maintain a secular constitutional framework while simultaneously regulating and legitimizing Islamic practice through centralized religious governance.

Mosques are not formally state institutions, yet their scale, location, and symbolic visibility suggest alignment with broader state development and representational strategies. This reflects a negotiated secularism in which Islam is not established as state religion, but remains central to the cultural legitimacy of the nation. Hal ini menandakan bahwasanya sekularisme di Kazakhstan bukan anti-agama, tetapi membentuk negotiated secularism (Sikhimbayeva et al., 2025).

Historical Continuity and Islamic Legitimacy

The construction and naming of monumental mosques in Astana also function to establish historical continuity between contemporary Kazakhstan and the broader Islamic heritage of Central Asia. The Hazrat Sultan Mosque is named after Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, whose teachings played a central role in the spread of Islam among Turkic peoples. By invoking Yasawi, Kazakhstan links its contemporary national identity to a historically legitimate and regionally respected Islamic tradition (Laruelle, 2014; UNESCO, 2003). The symbolic incorporation of Islamic motifs and references to figures such as Khoja Ahmed Yasawi reflects what (Zholdybalin, 2025) describes as the strategic activation of historical memory in the construction of Kazakh national identity.

Similarly, the Abu Nasr al-Farabi Mosque references Abu Nasr al-Farabi, emphasizing Kazakhstan's connection to the intellectual heritage of Islamic civilization. The use of these names suggests that Kazakhstan seeks to frame Islam not only as a religion, but also as a source of scholarship, ethics, and civilizational achievement. The naming of the Abu Nasr al-Farabi Mosque invokes the legacy of one of the most influential figures in Islamic political philosophy, whose work linked religion, ethics, and governance in the construction of the virtuous city (Parens, 2002). This strategy is particularly significant in the post-Soviet context. During the Soviet era, religious institutions were heavily restricted. The revival of Islamic symbols after independence therefore represents both cultural restoration and political re-legitimation (ianova et al., 2020).

The findings show that mosque architecture in Astana functions not merely as religious infrastructure, but as a site for the active production of national identity. The integration of Islamic and Kazakh visual symbols demonstrates that architecture serves as a medium through which collective identity is materially produced (Kudaibergenova, 2016). In this regard, the development and development of Islam in Kazakhstan continues to be rapid and develop from generation to generation as well as in the intellectual history of the agenda as a moderate and tolerant country (Tungatarov & Zholdybalin, 2025). From a constructivist perspective, this demonstrates that national identity is not fixed, but continuously produced through symbolic practices and spatial experience. Mosque architecture becomes a medium

through which Kazakhstan's Islamic-national identity is made visible, tangible, and experiential (Sikhimbayeva & Sadvokassova, 2025).

Figure 3: Exterior of Hazrat Sultan Mosque with caption explaining its symbolic association with Khoja Ahmed Yasawi.



Source: Results of Researchers' Field Observations at Hazret Sultan Mosque (2026).

The naming of major mosques after Khoja Ahmed Yasawi and Abu Nasr al-Farabi reflects a deliberate effort to anchor contemporary state narratives in the spiritual and intellectual heritage of the Islamic world. These historical references provide religious legitimacy while connecting Kazakhstan's modern identity to a broader civilizational past.

Mosques as Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy Infrastructure

The findings further indicate that monumental mosques function as part of Kazakhstan's soft power and cultural diplomacy strategy. According to Nye (2004) , soft power derives from the ability to shape preferences through attraction rather than coercion. In this context, mosque architecture communicates values such as moderation, tolerance, and cultural sophistication.

Interviews with mosque administrators, Muftiate officials, and diplomatic representatives show that the mosques regularly host international visitors, foreign delegations, and tourists. The Astana Grand Mosque in particular is included in official state tours and frequently presented as a symbol of Kazakhstan's openness and Islamic heritage. An Indonesian diplomat in Astana observed that the Astana Grand Mosque "tells a story about Kazakhstan through architecture." According to the informant, the mosque communicates the country's image as peaceful, modern, and culturally confident (Gustaf, personal communication, March 15, 2026).

This architectural diplomacy complements Kazakhstan's broader foreign policy initiatives, including the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, which positions the country as a platform for global interfaith dialogue. Tokayev emphasizes that such initiatives reflect Kazakhstan's aspiration to contribute to peace and religious understanding (Tungatarov & Zholdybalin, 2025). The promo-

tion of interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance supports kazakhstan's international image as a moderate and cooperation Muslim-majority country (Khamzina et al., 2026). Thus, mosque architecture serves as diplomatic infrastructure that translates abstract narratives of moderation and tolerance into visible, experiential spaces for international audiences. This symbolic function is reinforced by Kazakhstan's organization of the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, which positions Astana as a global center for interfaith dialogue and strengthens the country's reputation as a promoter of tolerance and moderate Islam.

Comparative Summary of the Three Mosques

The three mosques examined in this study represent distinct but complementary dimensions of Kazakhstan's Islamic nation branding strategy. For comparison, see Table 1:

Table 1. Comparative Functions of Major Mosques in Astana

Mosque	**Primary Representation**	**Strategic Function**	**Nation Branding Role**
Hazrat Sultan Mosque	Institutional Islam	Symbolizes post-Soviet Islamic revival and historical legitimacy	Symbol of Post-Soviet Islamic Revival
Abu Nasr al-Farabi Mosque	Community Islam	Represents everyday religious practice and intellectual heritage	Representation of lived and Inclusive Islam
Astana Grand Mosque	Global Islam	Projects Kazakhstan's international image and soft power	Flagship symbol of Kazakhstan's nation branding

Source: observation results based on field observation analysis (2026).

The comparison shows that Kazakhstan's Islamic identity is articulated at multiple scales. The Hazrat Sultan Mosque emphasizes institutional legitimacy, the Abu Nasr al-Farabi Mosque reflects lived religious practice, and the Astana Grand Mosque projects a globally oriented image of moderate Islam. Taken together, these mosques form an integrated symbolic system through which Kazakhstan reconstructs Islamic identity, negotiates secularism, and enhances its international reputation.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that monumental mosque architecture in Astana functions as a strategic instrument of nation branding in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. Rather than serving solely as places of worship, the Hazrat Sultan Mosque, Abu Nasr al-Farabi Mosque, and Astana Grand Mosque operate as symbolic infrastructures through which the state reconstructs Islamic identity, negotiates secularism, and projects a distinctive international image.

The findings show that Kazakhstan strategically incorporates Islamic symbols into public architecture to generate historical legitimacy, cultural authenticity, and diplomatic visibility. Through the integration of religious and national motifs, mosque architecture communicates a narrative of continuity between Kazakhstan's Islamic heritage and its contemporary identity as a modern, moderate, and tolerant Muslim-majority state. This process illustrates a form of negotiated secularism in which religion remains institutionally separate from the state but is symbolically embedded within national representation.

The study also reveals that Islamic identity is represented at multiple scales. Hazrat Sultan Mosque embodies institutional and historical legitimacy, Abu Nasr al-Farabi Mosque reflects everyday and community-based Islam, and Astana Grand Mosque projects Kazakhstan's identity to global audiences as part of its soft power strategy.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the literature on nation branding, post-Soviet identity formation, and the politics of religious architecture by demonstrating that architecture is not merely a reflection of identity, but an active instrument in its construction and projection. The case of Kazakhstan shows that a secular state can strategically mobilize religious symbols to strengthen domestic legitimacy and enhance international reputation without abandoning its constitutional commitment to secular governance.

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Author's Contributions

Muhammad Juliansyah Akbar: *Conceptualization, Investigation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft, Visualization.*
Aniek Nurhayati: *Supervision, Methodology, Validation, Writing – Review & Editing.*

Statement of Authenticity

The authors declare that this article is an original scientific work and is free from plagiarism. All data, citations, and references used in this article have been fully listed in accordance with the academic requirements and citation style of the American Psychological Association (APA). This article has not been published previously in any journal, proceedings, or other academic media, and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere.

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