



# The Evolution of Religious Doctrines and their Impact on the Cultural Heritage of Central Asia

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## Abstract

The aim of this study was to identify the mechanisms of religious transformation and cultural continuity in the countries of Central Asia through the analysis of Islamic discourse in texts and architecture. This study specifically addresses the research question: how does Islamic discourse influence both religious transformation and cultural continuity across different Central Asian contexts? The methodological framework included content analysis of religious sources (treatises, fatwas, sermons), discourse analysis of normative documents from the Soviet period, and thematic analysis of architectural forms. The empirical material encompassed Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan, enabling a comparative examination of religious dynamics across the region. The research established that the Islamic tradition in the region maintained stable semantic and conceptual cores – such as dhikr, tariqa, akhlaq, umma, and iman – while their interpretations varied according to local cultural codes. In Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, Hanafi and Sufi rhetoric predominated; Tajikistan demonstrated the presence of philosophical-Shī'a elements; in Turkmenistan, religious knowledge was interwoven into oral tradition and folklore. The Soviet period exhibited a profound transformation of the religious infrastructure: institutional continuity was disrupted, the language of religious discourse was altered, and sacred space was curtailed. At the same time, epic and poetic genres ensured the partial preservation of Islamic symbolism. Post-Soviet religious rhetoric assumed a regulatory character, reflecting the imperatives of nation-building. Contemporary fatwas and khutbas were dominated by themes of moderation, morality, social responsibility, and cultural identity. The architecture of sacred sites recorded the evolution of Islamic identity: from medieval mausoleums to contemporary mosques reflecting a synthesis of religious and state strategies. The original contribution of this study lies in providing a comprehensive comparative analysis of Islamic discourse across multiple Central Asian countries, integrating textual and architectural evidence to trace both continuity and transformation. A possible avenue for future research could explore the impact of digital media and online religious platforms on contemporary Islamic discourse and identity formation in the region.

**Keywords:** ideological transformations, institutional shifts, Islamic rhetoric, Sufi tradition, architectural representation.

## Introduction



The relevance of this research is determined by the need for a comprehensive analysis of religious doctrines that have influenced the cultural heritage of the countries of Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Over the centuries, the transformation of religious thought in this region occurred under the influence of Islamisation, Sufi practices, colonial and post-colonial processes, as well as state policy in the religious sphere. The contemporary stage is characterised by an active reassessment of spiritual traditions and the aspiration of nation-states to reinterpret the religious component within the framework of cultural identity. This has necessitated a systematic scholarly approach to the study of religious texts, fatwas, sermons, and architectural monuments as elements of sacred heritage.

The research problem consists in identifying and comparing the mechanisms through which religious doctrines – primarily Islam in its various interpretations – have shaped cultural models and representations in Central Asia. Despite a substantial body of scholarship devoted to individual aspects of spirituality and religious transformation, a holistic interdisciplinary reconstruction of the interaction between religious texts, oral traditions, and architectural semiotics has been lacking. A comparative approach was therefore required, encompassing both historical and contemporary data, including empirically validated sources from different countries of the region.

The philosophical and ethical comprehension of the religious identity of the Kazakh people was examined in the work of Chermukhambetov et al. (2024). This study focused on the relationship between Islamic anthropology and traditional Kazakh consciousness. The authors concluded that religious norms continue to perform a regulatory function in shaping the moral orientations of contemporary society. The political aspects of Sufism and mechanisms of religious legitimation were addressed by Karimov et al. (2024). Their research traced institutional continuity between the classical forms of Sufi influence and modern structures of spiritual leadership in Kazakhstan, noting the resilience of religious practices integrated into the politico-administrative context.

The analysis of the religious situation in a post-secular environment was carried out by Baitenova et al. (2021), which documented the growing interest in Islam in Kazakhstani society after independence. Special attention was given to the dynamics of religious activity, the strengthening role of Islamic institutions, and the engagement of youth in religious practices. From an educational perspective, Islam was examined in the study of Beisenbayev et al. (2024), which highlighted institutional changes in the teaching of religious disciplines and emphasised the role of religious education in shaping social behaviour and normative frameworks.

A historical retrospective of the Islamic revival in post-Soviet Kazakhstan was presented by Sadvokassov and Zhumashev (2023). The authors reconstructed key stages in the development of Islamic structures, traced the influence of state policy on the transformation of religious infrastructure, and characterised societal responses to Islamisation. Contemporary Sufi practices were explored by Temirbayeva et al. (2021), who analysed ritual changes under modern religious conditions, identifying innovative elements accompanying the adaptation of traditional Sufi heritage to current social realities.

The social dimension of religious spirituality was analysed by Abikenov et al. (2025), who demonstrated that Islamic ethics significantly influence interpersonal relations, foster social trust, and serve as a stabilising factor amid sociocultural modernisation. The role of religion in sociocultural self-identification was the central theme of Burova et al. (2023), who examined perceptions of religious norms and values across different social environments, highlighting the differentiation of religious attitudes in urban and rural contexts and emphasising the significance of religion as an element of social order.

Issues of regulation and assessment of the religious sphere were addressed by Azil Khanov and Zhalgas (2022). Their study covered trends, risks, and institutional challenges shaping religious policy in Kazakhstan, with particular emphasis on the impact of transnational religious flows and regional specificities in the governance of religious processes. The interpretation of traditional Islam and ideological disagreements among various theological approaches formed the basis of the work by Zakhay et al. (2024), which recorded intense debates between conservative and reformist



currents, reflecting the search for balance between historical continuity and contemporary theological frameworks.

The conducted analysis demonstrated that, despite the significant volume of recent research, substantial gaps persist in the study of the religious and cultural heritage of Central Asia. Scholarly works rarely encompassed the countries of the region within a comparative framework based on a shared civilisational perspective. Researchers seldom focused on the substantive analysis of religious texts, fatwas, and sermons, which hinders the identification of the internal logic and dynamics of religious doctrines. Architectural monuments were mostly considered from the standpoint of chronology and formal history, without adequate attention to their semiotic and cultural dimensions. Furthermore, existing approaches lacked an interdisciplinary analysis that would integrate the tools of Islamic studies, architectural semiotics, and ethnocultural interpretation.

The objective of this research was to determine how the evolution of religious doctrines influenced the formation and transformation of cultural heritage in the countries of Central Asia, as reflected in texts, rhetoric, and architecture. The research tasks included: conducting a content analysis of religious sources, including treatises, fatwas, and sermons, with consideration of regional specificities (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan); examining architectural forms (mosques, mausoleums, madrasas) as reflections of religious processes and cultural identity; and comparing the collected data to identify commonalities and differences in the religious and cultural evolution of the Central Asian countries. The selected architectural sites and representative fatwas and khutbahs were carefully chosen to reflect the diversity of religious practices, local cultural contexts, and historical developments across the region.

## Materials and methods

The study employed a set of qualitative methods aimed at identifying the specific features of the evolution of religious doctrines and their manifestation in the cultural heritage of the countries of Central Asia. The research was conducted from January 2023 to May 2025 and encompassed five countries of the region: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. The principal methodological approach was content analysis of religious sources, taking into account regional and genre-specific characteristics, which made it possible to trace transformations in religious discourse across various historical, cultural, and political contexts. This method ensured the systematisation of concepts, categories, and rhetorical structures recorded in written and oral forms of Islamic discourse, as well as the identification of dominant thematic fields, lexical markers, and semantic oppositions in different cultural-historical contexts.

The empirical base of the study consisted of both classical and contemporary texts. The core sources included religious treatises and Sufi literature from the 10th to 19th centuries, such as “*Diwan-i Hikmet*” by Yassawi (2004), Arabic and Turkic manuscripts from the Kukeldash Madrasa collection (Dzhuraev, 2023), Persian legal-theological texts from Badakhshan (Elchibekov, 2021), as well as texts preserved in the Dashoguz region of Turkmenistan (Clement, 2020). These materials reflected the multilingual and multi-confessional structure of Islamic writing and the specific features of interpreting key concepts (*umma*, *nafs*, *dhikr*, *tariqa*, *shari’a*) in various cultural environments. The sampling of sources was purposeful and theoretically representative, including texts that captured major theological trends, linguistic diversity, and the cultural plurality of the Islamic tradition in the region. Selection was based on criteria of substantive richness and accessibility, while considering geographical affiliation and relevance to each country under study.

The second data set comprised oral forms of religious narrative, primarily epic and poetic works. Texts such as “*Manas*” (1977), “*Alpamys Batyr*” (Seydimbekov, 2019), and “*Kambar Batyr*” (1957), the epic “*Gorogly*” (Allanazarov, 2016), and the Tajik version of the Farhad and Shirin dastan (Navoi, 2016) were analysed. The examination of folkloric-epic sources allowed tracing how Islamic dogmatics and moral norms were embedded within the structure of heroic plots and revealed forms of religious socialisation through literary expression.



At the next stage of the study, Soviet normative documents reflecting the anti-religious policy of the twentieth century were examined. The sources included the Resolution of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of the Council of People's Commissars of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic "On Religious Associations" (1929), the report of the International Crisis Group on Turkmenistan (Repression and Regression..., 2004), archival materials on repressions in Kazakhstan (Bukhonova and Gribanova, 1998; Mass political repressions..., 2021), as well as an analytical study on the institutionalisation of Islam during the Soviet period (Kabdylhak, 2019). Discourse analysis was employed, focusing on ideological clichés, the rhetoric of opposition between faith and science, the sacred and the progressive, the traditional and the modern.

A corpus of 62 texts was compiled during the research – comprising official fatwas and Friday sermons (khutbas) published on the websites of the Muslim spiritual administrations of four Central Asian countries. From Kazakhstan, 15 fatwas and 10 khutbas published on the website of the Religious Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan (2025) were analysed; these emphasised the harmony between religious affiliation and civic identity. From Kyrgyzstan – 12 fatwas and 8 khutbas from the website of the Religious Board of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan (2025), addressing issues of digital ethics and youth behaviour. In Uzbekistan, 10 fatwas and 9 khutbas from the Muslim Office of Uzbekistan (2025) were studied, demonstrating a synthesis of classical Hanafi theology and national rhetoric. From Tajikistan – 6 fatwas and 4 khutbas from the Islamic Centre of the Republic of Tajikistan (2025), which highlighted family and moral values. This selection ensured the representativeness of the analysis of contemporary Islamic rhetoric in the region. Particular attention was given to the frequency of key concepts (moderation, sunnah, akhlaq, tadbir) and to the formulation of relationships between religious and civic identity.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, and ethical considerations were carefully taken into account in selecting and analysing texts, fatwas, khutbahs, and architectural sites. All sources were handled respectfully, ensuring cultural sensitivity and adherence to the relevant guidelines.

Architectural objects were considered in the context of the visual representation of religious and politico-cultural attitudes. Classical Islamic architectural monuments were analysed (the Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, the Registan ensemble), as well as contemporary mosques (Nur-Astana, Hazrat Sultan, Turkmenbashi Mosque), which made it possible to trace the transformation of sacred architecture as a form of expressing state ideology and cultural memory.

Comparative analysis was conducted at all stages of the study to identify both structural similarities and regional variations in religious transformation, including conceptual, rhetorical and visual representations. The integration of textual, semiotic and discourse analysis ensured the interdisciplinary character of the approach, enabling Islam to be presented not only as a theological system but also as an active mechanism of cultural adaptation and identification in diverse Central Asian contexts.

## Results

### ***Content analysis of religious sources (by Central Asian regions)***

Religious sources created and used in Central Asia provide data on cultural transformation and spiritual practices in the region. Their analysis makes it possible to trace how the religious worldview was shaped under the conditions of interaction between Islamic doctrine, local traditions, political regimes and socio-cultural changes. Content analysis of religious texts – both classical and contemporary – allows the identification of stable semantic and conceptual structures reflected in moral normativity, symbolic systems and forms of collective identity. Specific texts and architectural monuments are analytically significant because they embody the practical and ideological mechanisms through which Islam was communicated, adapted, and institutionalised in everyday life, providing insight into patterns of religious thought, social norms, and cultural negotiation beyond mere chronological description (Chung, 2025; Ivashko et al., 2020). This content analysis was operationalised through the identification of thematic categories and key lexical items, coding



recurrent concepts, and noting their frequency and contextual emphasis across different regions and genres. This section examines written, oral and institutional forms of religious discourse, including manuscript heritage, epic narratives, Soviet documents and modern preaching practices in the countries of Central Asia.

Religious texts created in Central Asia between the 10th and 19th centuries formed the foundation of Islamic discourse, incorporating both dogmatic and mystical-philosophical components (Bektenova et al., 2025; Apsamatova and Stempkovskaya, 2022). The region developed a multilingual tradition of religious writing, where Arabic was used to codify orthodox Islamic knowledge, Persian – for ethical and legal thought, and Chagatai and Turkic – for Sufi poetry, didactic works and the adaptation of religious concepts to the local context. These texts included elements of the Islamic conceptual system in both sedentary and nomadic populations.

One of the most representative sources of Turkic-language religious literature is “Diwan-i Hikmet” by Khoja Ahmad Yasawi (2004). The poetic form, language, and Sufi conception influenced religious education in southern Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Yasawi’s texts included concepts such as dhikr, tariqa, and nafs, reflecting religious ideas on inner purification. The interpretation of these concepts in Diwan-i Hikmet retained a strong connection with khanqah practice and expressed a synthesis of Islamic mysticism and local spiritual representations.

Manuscripts from the Kukeldash madrasa in Tashkent were dominated by Arabic-language texts oriented towards fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) and tafsir (Qur’anic exegesis). Theological treatises were based on the Hanafi school, characteristic of most of Central Asia. In Qur’anic commentaries, categories such as umma, hadd, and adab were commonly used. The lexical structure of these texts was formalised, addressed to a prepared reader, and served the function of religious-legal standardisation. A notable feature of the Tashkent manuscripts was the presence of glosses and marginalia in Turkic and Persian, indicating the multilingual interpretation of religious content (Dzhuraev, 2023).

An important stage in the spread of Islam in Central Asia was the rule of the Karakhanid dynasty (10th-12th centuries), during which Islam was first adopted as the state religion by a Turkic polity. The Karakhanids played a key role in the institutionalisation of Islam: madrasas, mosques and khanqahs were established, and theology developed in Turkic and Arabic. Islamic practices during this period were influenced by administrative centralisation, Turkic culture, and Hanafi Sunni doctrine. Urban centres such as Balasagun, Uzgen and Kashgar became crucial spiritual and educational hubs, actively transmitting Islamic knowledge.

The most striking example is the work of thinkers such as Yusuf Balasaguni, author of “Kutadgu Bilig”, where Islamic conceptions of power, morality and social justice were adapted to the Turkic cultural context. Under the Karakhanids, a model of Islamic legitimisation of power began to emerge, whereby the emir acted as a defender of the faith and a patron of scholars (Göksu, 2024; Balasaguni, 2004). During this period, Islam became not only a religious system but also the foundation of state ideology, determining the subsequent transformation of Islamic discourse in the region.

In Tajik Badakhshan, Persian religious-legal texts have been preserved, in which Islamic theology was combined with the local Shī‘ī-Isma‘īli tradition. These works placed emphasis on the category of imamate and considered spiritual hierarchy within the communal structure. Concepts such as umma and nafs were associated with collective responsibility and inner discipline. The Persian language in these texts functioned not only as a means of expressing religious doctrine but also as a medium for the poetic assimilation of spiritual knowledge oriented towards the elite. These sources included legal norms along with moral commentary. Manuscripts from the Tashauz region of Turkmenistan reflected the interaction between orthodox Islamic thought and post-Sufi popular piety. These texts recorded treatises in which core Islamic tenets were transmitted through structurally simplified formats – in the form of questions and answers, religious dialogues, and lists of permissible and forbidden acts (Clement, 2020). Dominant concepts included shari‘a, iman, and jannah (paradise). The linguistic structure of these texts displayed a strong influence of colloquial Turkmen, pointing to an orientation towards a broad audience of listeners and learners (Elchibekov, 2021).



At the same time, the Tajik tradition emphasised the intellectual-philosophical dimension of Islamic heritage, drawing upon Persian religious-legal manuscripts and literary texts that combined theology, ethics, and moral philosophy (Elchibekov, 2021; Navoi, 2016). In contrast, Turkmen sources exhibited a syncretism between written tradition and oral religious culture, where treatises, dialogues, and epic narratives were shaped by both doctrinal Islam and popular folklore (Clement, 2020; Allanazarov, 2016). Thus, lexemes such as *umma*, *nafs*, *tariqa*, and *dhikr* appeared in different semantic and functional contexts, ranging from strictly theological interpretations to everyday practices and ritualized expressions.

Islamic elements integrated into heroic-epic and folkloric forms played a significant role in shaping the worldview of Central Asian peoples (Issakova, 2015; Karabalaeva, 2023). The oral tradition, represented by *dastans* and poetic narratives, functioned not only as a means of preserving collective memory but also as a mechanism for adapting religious norms to everyday consciousness. Islamic dogmatics in oral genres manifested primarily in the form of symbolic images, direct religious allusions and moral prescriptions embedded in the narrative structure of heroic plots.

In the Kyrgyz epic “*Manas*” (1977), Islamic representations were combined with archaic mythological motifs, creating a unique model of cultural synthesis. The Sufi concept of the spiritual path was reflected in the figures of elders and spiritual mentors accompanying the hero. Frequent use of prayer formulas, references to Allah and sacred acts – such as *dhikr*, *tawba* (repentance), and *sabr* (patience) – indicated the rootedness of Islamic values in epic ethics. At the same time, Islamic rhetoric in *Manas* lacked a distinctly dogmatic tone, instead functioning as a system of religiously infused meanings transmitted through oral tradition and imagery. Kazakh *dastans* such as “*Alpamys Batyr*” (Seydimbekov, 2019) and “*Kambar Batyr*” (1957) also contained direct references to Islam, including mentions of the Prophet Muhammad, angels, *jihad* as just struggle, as well as moral norms related to honour, oath-keeping and the defence of faith.

The use of terms such as *shari’a*, *iman*, and *du’a* intensified the religious tenor of the narrative, while invocations of God became a key element in climactic scenes. In the Turkmen epic “*Gorogly*” (Allanazarov, 2016), a clearly articulated eschatological line can be traced, wherein the Islamic concept of the end of times and divine retribution found expression through prophetic imagery and notions of the hero’s salvific mission. Characters in the *dastan* endowed with knowledge of future events possessed religious authority and functioned as mediators between the earthly realm and the sacred. Islamic terminology in *Gorogly* was closely intertwined with elements of *shari’a*-based morality and representations of the afterlife. Images of hell and paradise, depictions of sinners’ torments and the rewards of the righteous were incorporated into the narrative for the purpose of religious socialisation of the audience. These elements not only heightened the dramatic tension of the plot but also fulfilled a didactic function, imparting a spiritual dimension to heroic deeds. In the Tajik literary tradition, Islamic content was developed within amorous-philosophical *dastans* such as “*Shirin and Farhad*” (Navoi, 2016). Here, Islamic symbolism was employed not as a rigid dogmatic system but as a framework for the moralistic framing of the narrative. Concepts of fidelity, self-denial, spiritual purification, and the trial of suffering were interpreted through religious categories. Love as purifying suffering was conceptualised in a Sufi register – as a path towards spiritual elevation – wherein characters addressed God in prayer, sought solace in religious texts, and adhered to the ethical prescriptions of Islam.

Regional variations in the articulation of the religious layer in oral tradition were shaped by the historical conditions of Islam’s dissemination, socio-cultural particularities, and the dominant theological schools (Elchibekov, 2021; Allanazarov, 2016; Seydimbekov, 2019; *Manas*, 1977). In Kyrgyz and Kazakh epics, Islamic motifs were embedded within the heroic narrative, serving an axiological function. The Turkmen tradition was marked by the prevalence of eschatological symbolism and the prophetic mission, while Tajik poetry gravitated towards a moral-philosophical context, wherein Islam was construed as the inner foundation of ethical choice.

Oral tradition acted as a space for adaptation and transmission of religious meanings. Beginning in the 1920s, state policies imposed strong pressure, transforming the religious landscape.



The anti-religious campaign in the Central Asian republics during the Soviet period constituted a deliberate and systematic practice aimed at dismantling traditional Islamic institutions, eliminating religious authorities, and reshaping religious consciousness in line with the ideology of atheism (Shaukenova et al., 2014; Baigabylov et al., 2013). The legal basis for these actions was provided by the Resolution of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of the Council of People's Commissars of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic "On Religious Associations" (1929), which officially restricted the activities of religious organisations, prohibited religious education, public forms of prayer, and the participation of minors in rituals. This normative act became the starting point for repressions against Muslim communities and the clergy throughout the republics of the region, as it legally empowered local authorities to close mosques and madrasas, arrest imams and teachers, confiscate religious property, and suppress public expressions of faith, thereby embedding the anti-religious agenda into institutional practice. In the Fergana Valley, encompassing territories of present-day Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, the policy of secularisation manifested in the large-scale liquidation of mosques, which began in the 1920s and reached its peak in the 1930s. The closure of religious edifices was accompanied by the confiscation of property, arrests of religious figures, and the conversion of mosques into secular facilities. In the rhetoric of official documents and reports of district and regional committees, phrases such as the need for the "eradication of religious counter-revolution" and the "re-education of the population" appeared frequently. Expressions such as "hotbeds of religious fanaticism" and "saboteurs of socialist construction" became entrenched.

In Turkmenistan, particularly in Ashgabat and Mary, the liquidation of Muslim communities occurred rapidly and in a centralised manner. Madrasas were closed under the pretext of non-compliance with socialist norms, Islamic festivals were supplanted by ideologically charged campaigns, and religious symbolism in the public sphere was either destroyed or marginalised. Newspapers supported this policy through visual propaganda – satirical caricatures of mullahs, accusations of ignorance, and publications discrediting religious rituals as "archaic and harmful" (Repression and Regression..., 2004).

In Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, the scale of repression took on a personalised dimension. Clergy were arrested on charges of "counter-revolutionary activity" and "religious propaganda". Archival records of the Committee for National Security and the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Kazakhstan point to numerous cases of imprisonment and executions without due judicial process. According to an archival collection on political repressions in Kazakhstan, hundreds of Muslim figures, including imams, khatibs, and madrasa instructors, were subjected to repression in 1937-1938 (Bukhonova and Gribanova, 1998). One documented case in the archival materials concerned the persecution of Muslim leaders, among whom Sayabek Zharmagambetov was mentioned, accused of religious activism and maintaining spiritual practices during the anti-religious campaign (Mass political repressions..., 2021).

Political rhetoric in various Central Asian republics varied depending on local ideological priorities. In Uzbekistan, particular emphasis was placed on eliminating Islamic forms of education and cultivating the image of the "new man", oriented towards a secular, rational, and atheistic worldview. In Tajikistan, ideological stress shifted towards amplifying concerns over "Pan-Islamism" and alleged external religious interference. Religious figures were often portrayed in the public discourse of the time as agents of alien influence or as carriers of ideological threats. In Kyrgyzstan, atheist rhetoric focused on the "destructiveness of superstition" in rural environments. In the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic, the press relied heavily on visual imagery and metaphors, associating religion with poverty, backwardness, and illiteracy.

According to research estimates, by the late 1930s more than 95% of mosques in Uzbekistan had been closed. A similar trend was observed in other republics. In Kazakhstan, only a handful of religious facilities remained in operation, strictly monitored by state security organs. These figures confirmed the systemic nature of the anti-religious campaign and its wide-scale implementation across all key regions of Central Asia (Kabdylhak, 2019). Linguistic aggression, normative restrictions, and visual propaganda became instruments for constructing a new cultural code in which religion was relegated to the periphery of the permissible (Issakova et al., 2022; Abdygalym et al.,



2025). The diversity of forms and meanings recorded in the religious discourse reflected not only the resilience of Islamic concepts but also their capacity for transformation under the influence of political, cultural, and socio-historical conditions.

In the context of post-Soviet transformation, Islamic rhetoric in the Central Asian states became an important instrument for legitimising spiritual practices, exercising moral regulation, and shaping national-religious identity (Gamza and Jones, 2021; Baitenova et al., 2021). Official fatwas and Friday sermons (khutbas), disseminated via the websites of the muftiates and public addresses in mosques, reflected current value orientations shaped under conditions of modernisation and politico-religious stabilisation.

Fatwas, as a form of official religious opinion issued by authoritative Islamic scholars on specific matters of creed and daily practice, played an important normative and pedagogical role in the post-Soviet period in the Central Asian countries (Zhandossova et al., 2025; Sultanbaeva et al., 2015). In texts addressing issues of morality, family, and social norms, emphasis was placed on respect for parents, preservation of the marital bond, moderation in personal conduct, and adherence to the norms of Islamic etiquette. Particular attention was devoted to such key concepts as *adab* (morality), *akhlaq* (ethical dispositions), *sunnah* (the example of the Prophet Muhammad), and *tadbir* (prudence, deliberate action), which were consistently incorporated into religious explanations and signalled an aspiration to structure the everyday life of believers in accordance with Islamic values and socially acceptable behavioural models (Hamdani, 2023; Zakhay et al., 2024).

In Kazakhstan, fatwas highlighted the harmonious combination of religious affiliation and civic identity (Toktarbekova et al., 2025; Lawrence et al., 2023). The notion of ancestral heritage in religious rhetoric was linked to the necessity of preserving cultural traditions, which manifested in a positive attitude towards such phenomena as the celebration of Nowruz or participation in community initiatives. In Kyrgyzstan, Islamic rhetoric actively engaged with youth audiences: fatwas included explanations regarding online behaviour, attendance at concerts, and attitudes towards contemporary art. The rhetoric employed a vocabulary of moderation (*itidal*), balancing the spiritual and the worldly, thereby reinforcing the image of the “rational Muslim” as a social norm. In Uzbekistan, religious argumentation was often constructed on a synthesis of classical Hanafi theology and the discourse of national revival. Emphasis was placed on respect for the homeland, observance of public order, and the cultivation of patriotism through Islamic values (Gamza and Jones, 2021).

Concepts of moderation, *sunnah*, and unity in official publications were construed as foundational for social stability. Tajik fatwas, despite irregular publication, likewise included calls for social cohesion and respect for traditions. Appeals by spiritual leaders drew upon the categorical framework of Sunni orthodoxy, while taking into account the cultural specificities of mountainous regions, including respect for elders, religious modesty, and family resilience. Friday khutbas delivered in the largest mosques of Almaty, Bishkek, Dushanbe, and Samarkand confirmed a common thematic focus on spiritual and moral issues. Regardless of the country, preachers regularly addressed themes of family responsibility, honesty in labour, tolerance, avoidance of religious fanaticism, and respect for state laws. The structure of the khutbas displayed a stable composition: an introductory reminder of the importance of God-consciousness (*taqwa*), a main section with commentary on Qur’anic verses and hadiths, and a concluding exhortation to prayer and repentance (Religious Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan, 2025; Religious Board of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan, 2025).

Lexically, the sermons combined Arabic terminology (as markers of authority and sanctity) with local linguistic elements, creating an immediate rapport with the audience. In Kazakh and Kyrgyz sermons, the vocabulary of kinship and tribal values was actively employed, while in Tajik and Uzbek sermons emphasis was placed on the tradition of learning, scholarship, and submission to God. Turkmen khutbas, despite limited public accessibility, based on available audio recordings, also revolved around the concepts of *sabr* (patience), *tawhid* (divine unity), and *itiqad* (conviction), underscoring a stable theological orientation. Comparative linguistic analysis demonstrated that the concepts of moderation, *sunnah*, ancestry, mercy, and responsibility were among the most. Fatwas

and khutbas performed not only an educational function but also a regulatory one, contributing to the normalisation of Islamic practices within the public and media space of the post-Soviet states.

### ***Architectural forms as a reflection of religious and cultural processes***

The structure of the khutbas displayed a stable composition: an introductory reminder of the importance of God-consciousness (taqwa), a main section with commentary on Qur’anic verses and hadiths, and a concluding exhortation to prayer and repentance (Religious Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan, 2025; Religious Board of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan, 2025). Architectural forms – ranging from classical mausolea to contemporary mosques – function as material bearers of ideological meanings, religious symbolism, and regional cultural memory. The Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi in Turkestan (Kazakhstan), erected in the late 14th century at the order of Emir Timur, constitutes a unique example of the architectural synthesis of Islamic spirituality and Turkic cultural tradition (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi in Turkestan (Kazakhstan)

*Source: Mausoleum of Hodja Ahmed Yasawa (2025).*

The architectural composition of the structure embodies the ideas of Sufi sacrality and political legitimisation. The symbolic significance of the mausoleum is associated with the figure of Yasawi himself – one of the most influential preachers of Turkic Sufism, whose teaching became a key factor in the Islamisation and spiritual consolidation of the Turkic-speaking population.

The spatial organisation of the mausoleum combines functional zones intended for rituals, pilgrimage, and the safeguarding of relics (Torebaev and Bayzhanova, 2013). The architecture employs traditional forms of Islamic domed construction, including iwan, mihrab, and a mausoleum niche, while adapting these to local building traditions and climatic conditions. Its monumentality, accentuated by a lofty pishtāq (portal) and a large central dome, possessed not only sacred but also political significance, signifying the central role of the Sufi cult in the formation of regional legitimacy.

The ornamental décor of the mausoleum includes inscriptions of Qur’anic verses, calligraphic formulas, and vegetal motifs characteristic of the Timurid school (Baizhanova et al., 2015). The inscriptions fulfilled not merely a decorative function but also delineated a sacred topography, shaping visual access to theological meanings. The architectural image of the mausoleum reflects the integration of religious symbolism, local cultural codes, and a state strategy of sacralising power (Kuldashev and Karimov, 2023).

This line of interaction between the sacred and the political continued its development in other architectural complexes of the region, where sacred space became not only a locus of worship but also a medium for educational and ideological expression. The most illustrative example of such synthesis is the architectural ensemble of the Registan in Samarkand, which constitutes a spatial representation of Islamic education, political ideology, and cultural hierarchy (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** The Registan Ensemble in Samarkand

*Source: Registan Ensemble (2025).*

Formed between the 15th and 17th centuries CE, the complex comprised three madrasas – Ulugh Beg, Sher-Dor, and Tilla-Kari – and served as a centre of scholarly-theological activity linked to the Hanafī school and its theological tradition. Formally, the ensemble fulfilled the function of an educational core; however, its architectural programme extended beyond utilitarian purposes. The positioning of the madrasas, the symmetry of the façades, and the monumental portals created a visual impression of order, stability, and authority. Such architectural organisation of space represented an idealised Islamic city, wherein knowledge, power, and faith were visually structured together. The Ulugh Beg madrasa, built in the 15th century CE, incorporated elements of a rational architectural programme characteristic of the Timurids: strict symmetry, mathematical proportionality, and restrained decorative treatment.

In contrast, the Sher-Dor madrasa (17th century CE) violated traditional prohibitions against depicting living beings, incorporating images of tigers and the sun – symbols of power and worldly order. This testified to a shift in theological rhetoric and the growing role of state ideology within sacred architecture. Tilla-Kari, in addition to its educational function, also served a cultic one, containing a fully functional mosque with a richly decorated mihrab, which underscored the fusion of religious space with a representational function.

The architectural language of the Registan was oriented not only towards the local Muslim but also towards the external observer – pilgrim, envoy, merchant. It conveyed a stable civilisational model wherein Islam was represented not as a private faith but as a comprehensive system of organising knowledge, power, and symbolic order (Kuldashev and Karimov, 2023).

This tradition of representing religious identity through architecture continued under new historical conditions. In the post-Soviet period, sacred construction in Central Asia acquired new forms in which religious revival was conjoined with state projects of cultural identity. Contemporary mosques, erected since the early 2000s, reflect processes of synthesising Islamic tradition and national

modernism (Aliyeva, 2025). An example of such architectural representation is the Nur-Astana Mosque in the capital of Kazakhstan, which combines classical elements of the Arab-Ottoman style with features of the modern urban landscape. The use of glass, geometric symmetry, and adaptation to the business district underscore its status as a symbol of state identity (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** The Nur-Astana Mosque (Kazakhstan)

*Source: The capital's Nur Astana mosque will be renamed (2021).*

Another striking example is the Hazret Sultan Mosque, completed in 2012. Its architectural image vividly illustrates the tendency towards monumentalisation of sacred space and its integration into official ideology. The ornamental motifs and scale of the edifice correspond to the classical canons of Islamic architecture; however, in the contemporary context, they also serve to express politico-cultural continuity (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** The Hazret Sultan Mosque (Kazakhstan)

*Source: Hazret Sultan Mosque (2025).*

The Nur-Astana Mosque, constructed in Astana in 2005, represents an example of spatial representation of Islamic identity within a secular state. Its architecture employs forms associated with the Arab-Ottoman style – dome, minarets, arcades – yet all elements are adapted to the urban logic of a modern capital. The colour scheme, geometric symmetry, and use of glass surfaces create

an image of an open, accessible, and simultaneously sacred space. The mosque is positioned not only as a place of worship but also as an element of state symbolism, frequently included in official tourist and diplomatic routes.

The Hazret Sultan Mosque in Nur-Sultan, completed in 2012, by its scale and design serves as a major national religious site. Its architectural image combines traditional decorative techniques with elements of monumentality characteristic of administrative buildings. Thus, the sacred space of the mosque simultaneously becomes a space for representing state legitimacy. Inscriptions, ornamentation, and the design of the mihrab are executed in the style of the late Timurid canon, symbolically linking the contemporary project with the historical Islamic heritage of the region (Hazret Sultan Mosque, 2025).

Contemporary mosques within the context of post-Soviet architecture function as instruments of visually affirming religious stability, identity, and political continuity (Dyomin et al., 2021). Their construction is accompanied by the involvement of state structures, which enhances their significance as elements of institutionalised Islam. In Turkmenistan, the architecture of mosques and religious structures in recent decades has become an expressive instrument of state symbolic policy. Unlike other countries in the region, where religious architecture largely preserved symbolic autonomy, in Turkmenistan it has increasingly been incorporated into the structure of official ideology. An example of this is the Saparmurat Turkmenbashi Mosque in Kipchak, built in 2004 (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** Saparmurat Turkmenbashi Mosque

*Source: Turkmenbashi Ruhi Mosque (2025).*

The architectural project combines Islamic symbolism with state narratives: alongside Qur'anic verses inscribed on the walls, quotations from the *Ruhnama*, authored by the country's first president, are also displayed (Turkmenbashi Ruhi Mosque, 2025). This integration of state ideology into a sacred space disrupts the traditional dichotomy between the religious and the political and signals an attempt to construct a unified system of cultural legitimation (Turkmenbashi Ruhi Mosque, 2025; *Repression and Regression in Turkmenistan*, 2004). The structural organisation of the mosque underscores the cult of personality: it is complemented by the president's mausoleum, incorporated into a single architectural ensemble (Turkmenbashi Ruhi Mosque, 2025). Such a composition situates it within a political framework. The scale, stylistic features and architectural lexicon reproduce the ideological discourse of national unity, centralisation, and continuity of power (*Repression and Regression in Turkmenistan*, 2004). Thus, in Turkmenistan, Islamic architecture ceases to function as an autonomous sacred symbol and becomes embedded within the state's representational system of the sacred (Turkmenbashi Ruhi Mosque, 2025; *Repression and Regression in Turkmenistan*, 2004). This reflects not only the specificity of the political regime but



also illustrates the limits of institutional autonomy of the religious sphere under authoritarian conditions.

The body of examples considered here supports the claim that architecture in Islamic culture in Central Asia operates not merely as a form of artistic expression, but as an instrument for shaping and transmitting theological, cultural, and political meanings. From Sufi mausolea to contemporary mosques, from Timurid madrasahs to state-sanctioned religious centres – all these forms reflect historical developments in Islamic identity and its interaction with spatial, political, and cultural contexts.

These examples illustrate that the religious transformation in Central Asian countries followed a similar trajectory of adapting Islam to sociocultural and political conditions, while preserving pronounced regional specificities in the interpretation and institutionalisation of faith. Islam functioned not only as a system of spiritual norms but also as a driving force of cultural continuity, ensuring the linkage between historical heritage and contemporary forms of identity. Architectural objects and textual sources operated as channels of collective memory, shaping enduring symbolic referents and securing the transmission of religious and cultural meanings in a changing historical context.

## Discussion

One of the central objectives of this study was to identify transformations of religious discourse in Central Asia under the influence of sociocultural and political factors. In this context, the findings resonate with a number of conclusions reached by other scholars, while in several cases revealing divergent emphases and offering a broader interpretation of regional specificities.

The examination of the anti-religious policies of the Soviet period shows changes in the language, institutions, and public practice of Islam. These findings partially align with the study by Turlybekova and Sadykova (2024), which analysed local mechanisms of anti-religious campaigns in the Pavlodar region of Kazakhstan. The authors demonstrated the personalised nature of repression, emphasising its administrative and regulatory dimensions. In contrast to the present study, which covered the regional landscape as a whole and traced the connection between repression, folkloric memory, and architectural transformation, the work of Turlybekova and Sadykova adopted a narrowly regional perspective. Nonetheless, their data corroborate observations regarding the fragmentary and heterogeneous character of anti-religious practices across the republics.

The analysis of the institutional transformation of Islam in the post-Soviet period was compared with the findings of Cornell (2024), who examined the model of state–religion relations in Central Asia. Cornell argued that under conditions of a strong power vertical, Islam was subjected to rigid regulation and instrumentalised as a tool for legitimising political regimes. The present research can be compared with this tendency, while also drawing attention to the adaptation of religious rhetoric to local cultural identity. In this context, sermons and fatwas functioned as channels for a bidirectional exchange between official doctrine and the needs of religious communities.

The results concerning the language of religious discourse in the digital era were juxtaposed with the observations of Zamhari and Han (2021), who analysed the platform *cariustadz.id* as an alternative channel for sermons and fatwas among an urban Muslim audience. The authors documented a process of fragmentation of religious authority and the growing popularity of informal sources of Islamic knowledge disseminated through social media. Their study demonstrated that the traditional *ʿulama* hierarchy had lost its monopoly on the interpretation of religious norms within the framework of networked communication. In contrast, the findings of the present research indicate the persistence of an institutional vertical of fatwas in Central Asia. Although fatwas and sermons began to address issues such as digital behaviour, online ethics, and information consumption, their lexical structure and references to the *sunnah* and classical tradition remained aligned with official spiritual administrations (Hamdani, 2023; Yucel and Albayrak, 2021). This suggests not a dissolution but an adaptive preservation of institutional authority within the digital media environment.

Similar issues were explored in the study by Hamdani (2023), which conceptualised fatwas in the era of digital communications as a hybrid genre combining traditional form with elements of user



interaction characteristic of social platforms. Hamdani concluded that the figure of the “digital mufti” had emerged as a new media persona seeking to reconcile religious knowledge with accessibility and immediacy. Unlike the present research, which focused on institutional structures, Hamdani emphasised the media aspect of fatwas. Nevertheless, both approaches address the transformation of traditional religious functions within digital communication environments. In the context of Central Asia, the findings indicate that state-recognised spiritual centres actively employ digital resources while maintaining the vertical of religious legitimacy, addressing new themes without forfeiting authority.

The analysis of rhetorical structures in Friday sermons confirmed the persistence of concepts such as moderation, responsibility, and obedience, which correlate with the findings of Yucel and Albayrak (2021), who examined the content of online fatwas related to bioethical issues, notably organ donation. The authors identified a stable semantic matrix grounded in moral-religious categories applicable to contemporary social practice. The present research indicates lexical stability of analogous categories, while also allowing comparison with a broader thematic range encompassing not only bioethical issues but also behavioural norms, state loyalty, family and communal ethics, showing the broader regulatory role of Islamic rhetoric.

The examination of architectural objects as mediators of religious and politico-cultural meanings enabled a comparison with the study by Kuldashev and Karimov (2023), which considered Uzbekistan’s architectural heritage through the lens of stylistic and morphological features. Unlike the present article, which analysed sacred architecture in the context of its ideological representation, particularly in post-Soviet projects, Kuldashev and Karimov focused primarily on the formal classification of architectural types, ornamentation, and constructive elements. Despite these methodological differences, the findings complement each other. Kuldashev and Karimov identified the persistence of Timurid canon elements – above all in ornamental motifs, domed spatial configurations, and compositional symmetry. These features are comparable to those identified in the present research in cases such as the Hazrat Sultan Mosque and the Registan ensemble, where architecture functioned as a means of symbolic legitimisation of Islamic tradition and state continuity.

The concept of Islamisation as a process of cultural adaptation received further elaboration in the work of Göksu (2024), which examined the geo-cultural models of Islam’s dissemination in Central Asia between the 8th and 11th centuries. The author demonstrated that Islam in the region did not spread as a rigid dogmatic system but was transformed in accordance with local conditions, geographical isolation, and cultural milieu. The present study revealed a parallel tendency in the later period: in contemporary sermons and fatwas, Arabic theological terms (umma, akhlaq, tawhid) were adapted to national linguistic codes, confirming the notion of Islamisation as a dynamic cultural practice involving rhetorical and lexical adaptation.

The historical dimension of Islamic transformation identified in this study was compared with the analysis by Malik and Khaki (2021), who traced the trajectory of Islamisation in Kazakhstan from the Arab conquest to the Soviet repressions. Their chronological model encompassed the key stages of the formation of Islamic tradition, institutional transformations, and the pressure exerted by the communist regime. These findings correlate with the present data, which likewise confirmed the evolution of Islamic forms from dogmatic tradition to folkloric adaptations and their subsequent displacement from the public sphere during the Soviet era. However, unlike Malik and Khaki’s study, the present research incorporated architectural and linguistic dimensions, enabling an examination not only of historical-political processes but also of their visual-symbolic and rhetorical embodiments in culture.

The theme of repressive pressure and its consequences finds parallels in the dissertation of Axelsson (2022), which emphasised the politico-ideological character of the anti-religious campaign as an integral component of the broader Soviet conflict between traditional worldviews and the doctrine of scientific atheism. Axelsson interpreted religious repression not as localised acts of violence but as a systemic attempt to expunge the sacred discourse from the public sphere. These conclusions resonate with the observations of the present research, which established that the

rhetoric of the Soviet press actively constructed a negative image of Islam, substituting religious vocabulary with clichés such as “fanaticism”, “backwardness”, and “perniciousness”.

Political rhetoric and religious regulation in the post-Soviet period were addressed in the study by Gamza and Jones (2021), which analysed the evolution of state policy towards Islam in Central Asian countries. Their work documented a phased transition from a repressive model to conditional liberalisation spanning the period from 1991 to 2018. In the context of the present research, it was shown that this liberalisation was accompanied not only by changes in the legal framework but also by a transformation of religious rhetoric itself: sermons and fatwas increasingly employed ideologically neutral yet socially normative categories aimed at reinforcing state identity.

The interplay between radicalisation and repression, as examined in the study by Omidi et al. (2024), highlighted the interdependence between political violence and Islamic radicalisation. Their research demonstrated that in Central Asia, official religiosity functioned as a buffer preventing radicalisation through the promotion of a moderate, adaptive Islam. In contrast to Omidi et al.’s model, which emphasised a closed cycle of violence, the present study identified compensatory mechanisms in the form of moral sermons, educational fatwas, and architectural symbols of stability.

The analysis of the sources highlights the relevance of an interdisciplinary approach, within which Islam in Central Asia is understood as both a contemporary and historical phenomenon represented in texts, architecture, rhetoric, and politics. This research not only reaffirmed certain previously established patterns but also contributed to their further elaboration, specification, and expansion through the inclusion of comparative and linguistic components.

## Conclusions

As a result of the research, the multifaceted manifestations of Islamic culture in some of the countries of Central Asia were synthesised, interpreted, and contextualised, encompassing both textual and architectural forms of religious expression. A content analysis of religious sources made it possible to identify persistent concepts of the Islamic tradition, embedded in written treatises, fatwas, sermons, and epic narratives. Across the entire region, a semantic stability of key notions such as *umma*, *dhikr*, *tariqa*, *akhlaq*, *sunnah*, and *iman* was recorded; however, their interpretations varied depending on the cultural context, the dominant theological schools, and the forms of religious articulation. These findings are directly linked to the theoretical frameworks and critical perspectives discussed earlier, showing how religious discourse and architectural expression interact with socio-political and cultural structures.

Religious texts produced in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan emphasised the Sufi and ethical dimensions of Islam, drawing upon the Hanafi tradition. In Tajik materials, elements of *Shī’a* and philosophical interpretation predominated, reflecting local forms of religious intellectual culture. In Turkmenistan, a syncretism of written doctrine and oral tradition was observed, with a pronounced influence of folklore on the structure of religious texts. During the Soviet period (1920s-1991), religious forms underwent transformation under the impact of anti-religious policies: institutional continuity was disrupted, public religiosity displaced, the language of religious discourse altered, and the functioning of religious institutions curtailed. At the same time, epic and folkloric forms contributed to the partial preservation of Islamic symbolism within the framework of oral cultural memory.

Fatwas and sermons often emphasised themes such as moderation, filial piety, and social responsibility, reflecting the normative function of religion in post-Soviet nation-building contexts (Burova et al., 2023). Regional rhetoric appears to adapt Islamic values to modernisation processes, transmitting spiritual orientations through linguistic and cultural markers relevant to each national community.

Architectural forms, ranging from mausoleums and madrasas to contemporary mosques, recorded the historical stages of Islamisation, the sacralisation of power, and cultural identity. Architecture functioned as a mediator between religion, the state, and society, reflecting both historical heritage and contemporary ideological priorities. Common elements were identified in the composition of sacred space (dome, mihrab, portal), while differences concerned the degree of politicisation of



architectural solutions. Taken together, the research materials illustrate the depth, diversity, and dynamics of the Islamic cultural evolution in the countries of Central Asia under study.

A limitation of the study lay in the fragmentary nature of the source base and the uneven accessibility of religious and architectural materials across the regions of Central Asia, which resulted in variations in the depth of analysis by country. Additionally, the scarcity of archival documentation, restricted access to contemporary religious publications, and the uneven preservation of oral traditions further constrained the ability to reconstruct a fully representative picture of Islamic cultural evolution in certain areas.

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