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PROUDLY REJECTED: THE CASE OF GRAND MOSQUE INITIATIVE IN HELSINKI

HOSSAM HEWIDY AND KAISA SCHMIDT-THOMÉ

Abstract

In 2014, an initiative to build a mosque in Helsinki was presented to the Deputy Mayor. The founders of the initiative had been promised royal funding from the Kingdom of Bahrain for the implementation of the project. The initiative stimulated a public debate that reached its peak during the municipal election campaigns in 2017. In December 2017, the City of Helsinki unanimously decided to reject the proposal. This article examines the response to the initiative by the city planners and whether it was treated differently from other applications. Data was collected through interviews, document review and spatial analysis. The article found that a destructive atmosphere was created through the (mis)representation of the initiative founders and the funding resources in the politicians' arguments, which were problem-oriented and transnational in nature. On the contrary, planners were responsive to dealing with a socially and politically sensitive topic without prior experience but with a few shortcomings. The article contributes to the literature bridging architecture, explicitly mosques and their symbolic meaning in European cities, and social sciences concerning the integration of immigrants and their well-being. It suggests that there is a need to *normalise* the purpose-built mosque issue.

Introduction

On 9 May 2017, a discussion event – *A (new) Mosque for Helsinki?* – starts with lectures about the political situation in the Near East. First, a senior research fellow talks about the geopolitical and religious tensions, and Isis/Daesh. Then, a journalist speaks about the monolithic understandings of Islam currently fed by Saudi Arabia and elaborates on the current tensions between different Muslim groups. She also talks about Bahrain, a potential funding source for the Helsinki mosque initiative and ponders on the possibility of "Finnish Islam". The event continues with a panel discussion about the pros and cons of a central mosque. The panellists, mainly local politicians across the political spectrum, make various claims about the proposal. They frequently refer to being supportive of religious freedom, but then also express their concerns, mostly related to the sources of financing. The audience gets to participate in the discussion towards the end of the event. After two hours and twenty minutes, the event ends without any presentation of the mosque proposal itself.

The event showed that there was more to this debate than merely finding a plot of land for a building. The organisers, consisting of societally active citizens, claimed to be neutral and critical people, volunteering to encourage enlightened discussions. However, they deliberately chose to start with lectures about the Near East instead of, for instance, the opportunities to practice one's religion in Helsinki. They regretted that nobody from the team behind the mosque project proposal could attend, as the invitation was sent out at a short notice. They also rebutted the audience's criticism about the unconstructive set-up. The mosque project was not discussed at all, so apprehending its nature from the discussion would have been difficult for a person without any pre-existing knowledge about the project itself. Nevertheless, the audience was invited to judge its practicality. Prior to the event, the mosque proposal had been debated by many candidates, i.e., many opponents and few supporters of the mosque and cultural centre, for several weeks preceding the municipal elections on 9 April 2017. The initiative was called *The Grand Mosque and the Multifunctional Oasis Centre*. A group of initiators had put forward a proposal to the city officials requesting that a plot of land was reserved to provide a basis for the next phase of project development. Plot requests normally get a rather straightforward treatment, but in the case at hand several other items besides the feasibility of the project came to play a role.

In many other European cities, central mosques and adjacent cultural centres have become urban hubs by gathering diverse activities (Mack, 2015; Kuppinger, 2011; 2019; Simonsen, Neergard & Koefoed, 2019). Such a role is essential for the Muslim community, which seeks, in addition to spiritual needs, a diverse range of services offered by these hubs. However, erecting mosques and cultural centres has caused controversies that scholars have devoted considerable attention to (Allievi, 2009; 2013;

Avcıoğlu 2013; Tamimi Arab, 2013). There is an earlier Finnish case where a mosque proposal was rejected in Turku in 1996 (Martikainen, 2013). Apart from this, little attention has been paid to the needs of different faith groups in Finnish cities. This is a part of broader inability to address multiculturalism in Finnish urban planning. Lapintie (2015) has explained this absence by functionalism and constraints of biopolitics in the planning tradition. Planning based on statistical data is bounded by biological characteristics (e.g., age, sex, health, household size), thus creating no room for cultural considerations, let alone the needs of different faith groups. At the same time, a considerable amount of attention – both in the urban planning practice and related research – is given to preventing segregation and related housing and education policies in Finland. The anti-segregation policy tradition tries to cater for equality and well-being of all neighbourhoods (City Strategy, 2017) by fostering a social mix across them (Dhalmann & Vilkama, 2009). Thus, this low tolerance for segregation seems to drive urban practice towards avoiding problems of diversity rather than considering its potential (Hewidy & Lilius, 2021a).

When examining the case of the rejected Helsinki Grand Mosque, the authors see a city that is being challenged: it took a stance to something broader than plot reservation. The arguments for and against the mosque included questions that must be understood against the background of increasing secularism and transnationalism. Whereas the increasing secularisation can challenge the recognition of religious groups, it has also been accused of creating an exclusive liberal public sphere that more broadly ignores weaker groups, fading out the realities of religious groups, poor classes and immigrants (Habermas, 2009; 2011; Asad, 2003). The mosque case also reflects transnational considerations. The Helsinki Mosque is being framed as a part of broader processes that extend beyond the boundaries of the nation-state. This feeds, for example, suspicions around the external funding of mosques (Simonsen et al., 2019; Mack, 2019; Pauha & Konttori, 2020), and leads to considering mosques a manifestation of difference (Göle, 2011). Such circumstances necessitate planning policies to accommodate Muslims in European cities (Modood, 2012) and to *normalise* the erection of a purpose-built mosque (Maussen, 2009). Consequently, such transformation imposes new roles for planners and architects beyond their current know-how (Mack, 2019). Thus, this article addresses the following two questions:

1. How did urban planners respond to the initiative of the Grand Mosque and the Multifunctional Oasis Centre?
2. Was the initiative treated differently from other development projects and why?

The article argues that there is a need for an integrative urban policy, reflecting immigrants' needs more than the conservative anti-segregation policies. The case at hand showed responsive reactions by planners

with only a few shortcomings. Furthermore, the lack of integrative policy allowed politicians to back their opposing arguments with transnationalist considerations letting them bypass the local frame conditions. The party politics took the upper hand although the planners had comprehensive material to support a fact-based decision. The rest of the article is structured into four sections: *State of the art*, *Setting the scene*, *What was wrong?* and *Rejected before presented*.

State of the art

Mosques and place-making

Many cities in Europe acknowledge the dynamic relations between mosques and their surroundings. Examples include Copenhagen (Neergaard, Koefoed & Simonsen, 2017), Bradford (McLoughlin, 2005), Rotterdam (Maussen, 2009) and Stockholm (Mack, 2015; 2019). Others legitimise purpose-built mosques with more demanding regulations such as the Lombardy region in Italy (Chiodelli & Moroni, 2017). In Finland, however, planning for diversity is absent from the interest of both research and practice (Hewidy & Lilius, 2021a; 2021b).

The mosque controversies in European cities over the past decades have received considerable scholarly attention (Allievi, 2009; 2013; Avcıoğlu, 2013). However, less attention has been paid to place-making and the creation of Muslim urban spatiality once a mosque exists. Be they purpose-built or recycled spaces (*musallas*), mosques in European cities enjoy the character of being an urban catalyst, at least for their users and visitors. Kuppinger (2019) observed a similar role of the mosque in place-making in the Salam Mosque complex, located in an industrial district in Stuttgart. A remarkable transformation was also seen in eastern Helsinki with the arrival of a prayer room to a strip mall called Puhos. Puhos has become an important place-maker with mainly ethnic retailers offering diverse services and goods (Hewidy & Lilius, 2021a). In another area, Malmi, two prayer rooms have also led to the sprouting of immigrants' amenities and thereby to a recovery of public street life (Hewidy & Lilius, 2021b).

A similar trend of place-making has been observed in Sweden where the City of Stockholm planned three mosques in the Järva Lift plan. Mack (2015) argued that calling them *Multicultural Centres* was less provocative and reduced public hostility. Mack (2020) further stated that the name *Multicultural Centre* reflects openness, welcoming visitors from the Muslim community and beyond. These multicultural centres can function as community spaces, for example, through youth projects as in Copenhagen (Simonsen et al., 2019). Mack (2020) urged founding such community spaces, located far from the city's geographical centre, as a way to create new urban centres. In Britain, there is also a demand for

the services provided by Muslim institutions for their communities; thus, mosques have been functioning as community centres (McLoughlin, 2005, p. 1048). Therefore, mosques in European cities are "more than a place for prayer" (Mack, 2015, p.410), and accordingly a potential to retrofit the suburbia (Mack, 2020). Such a role fulfilled by mosques justifies the relationship between social change, represented in the multiple needs of immigrants, and the built environment through introducing a new large-scale religious complex that contributes to fulfilling such needs. Simply, it is not a religious institute but far beyond.

Planners: integration agents or gatekeepers?

Mosque projects in European cities tend to raise the highest opposing emotions during the design and planning process (Verkaaik, 2020, p. 118). Thus, planning policy and the role of planners in such projects is vital. Planners, as a technocratic body, are well-trained to deal with technical problems; however, facing politically and socially provocative mosque projects are typically beyond their know-how (Mack, 2020). Embedding the mosque creation in planning policy would help to *normalise* it and to institutionally accommodate Muslims (Modood, 2012) as a sign of "recognition of difference" (Göle, 2011). In his dissertation, Maussen (2009, p. 204) introduced an integrative multi-scalar model that deals with the mosque as: 1) a neighbourhood facility, ensuring adequate worshipping facilities for each group; 2) an integrative part in the city district maintaining a common perspective shared by Muslims and non-Muslims reflecting their various concerns; and 3) consequently, a topic that can be *normally* discussed as a component in urban development. Mack (2019, p. 91) observed a flexible transformation in the role of Swedish planners from the old Social Democratic approach, minimizing class differences in top-down architecture and planning, to the role of "service providers". Furthermore, the founders of the initiatives of erecting faith-space projects are "treated as customers placing an order" rather than as a particular group of citizens (Mack, 2019, p. 90). In such projects, the Swedish planners found themselves making aesthetic judgments, negotiating with foreign funders and performing as immigrants' integration agents in projects of a high social sensitivity, in addition to their typical tasks.

However, in conservative planning systems, the planners act in a gatekeeping manner. For example, in the Lombardy region in Italy, fuzzy planning regulations and their deliberately biased interpretations limit the opportunities to address the needs of groups that practice a minority religion (Chiodelli & Moroni, 2017). Furthermore, in avoiding the transformation of the traditional European city, some local authorities tend to allow the conversion of a variety of old unused buildings into mosques, rather than permit a purpose-built new construction (e.g., Avcıoğlu, 2013).

Visibility and material form

The material form of the mosques often initiates the obstruction against them in the West, or at least the announced opposition. The resistance to erecting purpose-built mosques in European cities is twofold according to Allievi (2009). First, mosques are blamed for the decline of property value, traffic problems, noise and violence. Second, Islam as an ideology is negatively perceived for oppressing women or being incompatible with mainstream values. When examining mosques in Rotterdam, Maussen (2009) concluded that there is a tension between the "nostalgia mosque" architecture and the modern "polder mosques". While the former brings foreign architecture to urban space, the latter is easily received for being harmonized with Dutch architecture. In Copenhagen, mosque developers were cautious to adopt moderate architectural concepts to cope with Nordic minimalist architecture and materialise the ambivalence between visibility and invisibility (see Simonsen et al., 2019; Neergaard, Koefoed & Simonsen, 2017). In Bradford, the planning law sustains the idea of preserving the "Britishness" of the built environment in the age of the conflict over the Islamisation of public space (McLoughlin, 2005). Recalling the Järva Lift plan, Swedish architects, without previous expertise in the design of mosques, have managed to reshape architectural concepts by Kuwaiti and Saudi architects to make them appealing to the local planning bureaucracy (Mack, 2015). Thus, in addition to the new challenges solved by planners acting as integrations agents, architects also needed to harmonize the architecture of the foreign buildings.

Mosques are often considered strange due to their look and size (Maussen, 2009, p. 231). Tamimi Arab (2013) coined the term *megamosqueing* to emphasise the notion of size as a social construction of the building image and how it can be used in the opposing discourse. The *megamosque* genre reflects both anxieties by opposing mainstream and pride by Muslim community (Tamimi Arab, 2013, p. 57). When deciding a proper location for a mosque, Maussen's (2009, p. 204) model recommends that planners have to steer the entire "planning process" and conduct "location study" to determine the "supply area" where the mosque congregation resides. However, the peripheral locations are often a *solution* to lower the debates; thus, in many cities, mosques are invisible in mainstream locations and are mostly ignored by municipalities (Kuppinger, 2011, p. 78).

Behind freedom of religion

> *[...] for many people and for many reasons having a mosque is really fierce and feels quite unrelated to the normal life needs. People think that it would be horrible to have this mosque.*
>
> Helsinki Deputy mayor, Green League Interviewee

Despite the freedom of religion sustained by the Finnish constitution,

the deputy mayor clarified the complexity of founding a mosque. A purpose-built mosque is multidisciplinary by nature; thus, it is not possible to avoid politics in such discourse. Politics opposing mosques can be situated in the domains of secularism or transnationalism. It is unlikely that secularism can cope with the global revitalisation of religious movements, especially in cases of faith groups residing in Europe (Asad, 2003). Habermas (2009, p. 63) described the post-secular society as "the continued existence of religious communities in an increasingly secularized environment". Urging for tolerance and recognition of religious groups in the European secular public sphere, Habermas (2011, p. 23) clearly confirmed that "the secularisation of the state is not the same as the secularisation of society". Similarly, Maussen (2009, p. 49) stated that secularism is itself considered a worldview; therefore, states aiming to be justly neutral should not themselves embrace a secularist viewpoint.

While most Europeans declare that they are not religious and assert that God is not significant in their lives, those who consider themselves religious Christians think that religion belongs to the private space (e.g., Cesari, 2013). The basic idea of secularity is to distinguish the private sphere from the public sphere and to keep the latter neutral from personal belief. Several daily congregations of Muslims impose religion from the private sphere to the public sphere (e.g., Allievi, 2013). According to Asad (2003), the secular space is not a neutrally shared space formed of different voices and several groups admitting the same moralities of citizenship. Instead, the liberal public sphere excludes religious groups, poor classes and immigrants (Asad, 1993; 2003). Asad argues that several layers of western cultural history are hidden in the *secular,* covered by notions such as democracy (Asad, 2003). To reduce the impact of such layers on Muslims, Modood (2012) urged accommodating Muslims, and Maussen (2009) introduced integration of mosques in planning policy: *the normalisation*. Recalling the deputy mayor stating "*it would be horrible to have this mosque*", the article raises the following question: was it about the architecture of a strange building? It would then be a design problem that could be solved. Or was it *horrible* in principle? This would exclude the Muslim community from the urban space and give superiority to the majority to decide what is accepted and what is not. In either meaning, such opposition raises the importance of normalising the issue of purposely built mosques in planning (Maussen, 2009), harmonising its architecture (also in Mack, 2015; 2019) and accommodating Muslims in European cities (Göle, 2011; Modood, 2012).

The public atmosphere in discussions about mosque projects in European cities is transnational by nature. In studying the mosque controversy in East London, Dehanas & Pieri (2011, p. 803) issued their scalar politics perspective as "the socially constructed framing of the mosque's scale, the scale of the mosque plans, and the scale of public spheres in which the project was contested." Many mosques lack financial resources and

hardly cover the monthly expenses (e.g., Herz & Munsch, 2019). Therefore, many purpose-built mosques in European cities were externally funded by governments or foundations (Delaney, 2020; Tamimi Arab, 2013). However, the external funding is where transnationalism is obvious. For example, the public perception of the Qatari funding of a mosque in Copenhagen was that of suspicion (Simonsen et al., 2019). Moreover, in the Järva Lift plan in Stockholm suburbia, the planners reported public fears about the external funders intending to take over Sweden (Mack, 2019) and that the Saudi totalitarian dictator system should not be allowed to fund mosques (Mack, 2015). The case at hand also raised typical debates, as indicated by the politician below.

> *Everybody would have to be assured that this is not a sort of a project for promoting Wahhabi Islamism from Riyadh*
>
> National Coalition Party Interviewee A

The quote above is an example of 1) suspicions around funding (Simonsen et al., 2019; Mack, 2019), 2) transnationalism by referring to *Riyadh* and 3) assumption of loyalty to *Wahhabi Islamism*. The Oasis Centre was dealt with in a transnational approach as shown by the event mentioned in the introduction. Furthermore, Finnish politicians lacked knowledge about religions; therefore, they have been prevented from making fact-based decisions (Pauha & Konttori, 2020). Some interviewed politicians also referred to the conflicts between Shia and Sunni elsewhere in the world to justify their refusal of the project. Additionally, they built upon such assumptions a conditional situation: the permit for a mosque will be approved when both sects are ready to erect their own mosque.

> *We would definitely not like to have possible political conflicts or even violent ones between the Shia and Sunni so the answer is then we will probably be effective in preventing it [by rejecting the mosque imitative].*
>
> National Coalition Party Interviewee A

Setting the scene

Method

The case at hand is multidisciplinary *par excellence*, interlinking architecture, planning and politics. It is important to study the relationship between social and demographic change and the built environment, including the design of new large-scale religious buildings. Therefore, we used various methods in seeking answers for the question of *normalizing* the project. First, the spatial pattern of Muslims' living areas in the metropolitan area was studied and analysed regarding the site location: its urban and demographic characteristics. In doing so, we were able to understand whether the planners had studied the location and deter-
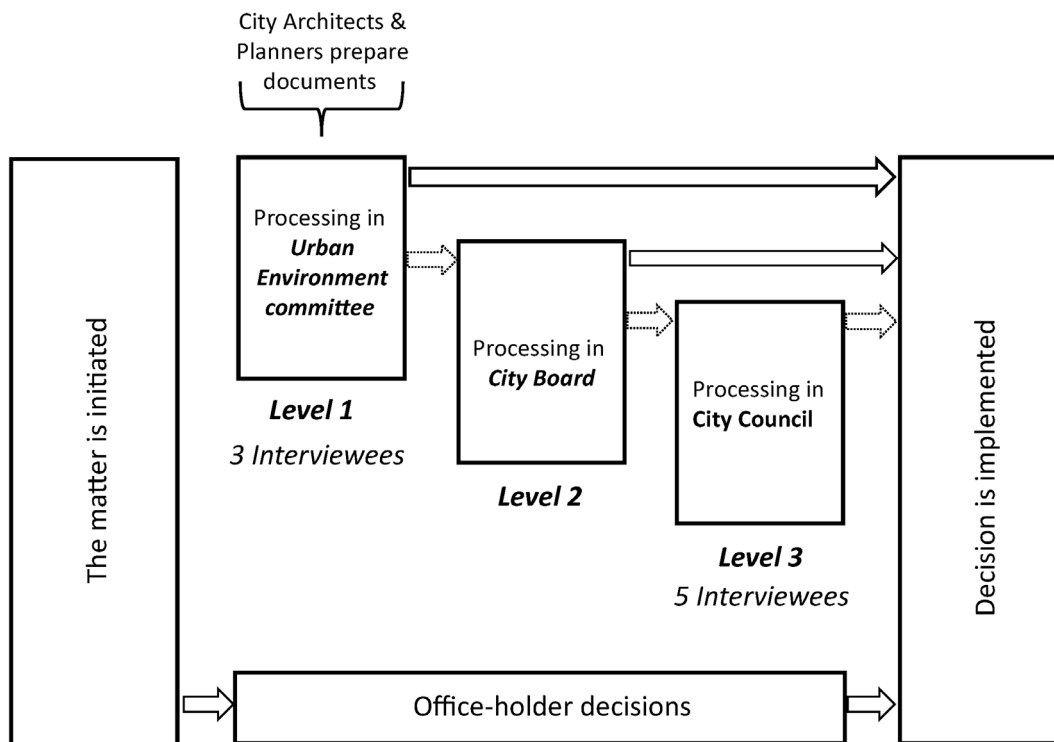
mined the supply area (as in Maussen, 2009). It further showed whether such a location might enable the mosque to act as a neighbourhood facility, an urban hub and a place-maker (e.g., Kuppinger, 2019; Hewidy & Lilius, 2021b; Mack, 2015; 2020). Second, although the mosque initiative was in the pre-design phase, the role of the planners in harmonizing the expected/intended architecture of the foreign building to suit the cityscape was essential (e.g., Mack, 2015). Therefore, we studied the architectural concepts and the role of planners in preparing a logical setting of the city image. Third, to shed light on the decision-making process (Figure 1), we used semi-structured interviews[1] and analysed the preparatory documents, including those that the Urban Environment Committee had reviewed (i.e., the statements of ministries and other expert reports).

We interviewed politicians (N=9), public servants (N=2) and a representative of the conglomerate. All interviews were face-to-face apart from one politician who answered by email. The interviews were all held in English except for the public servants, whose interviews were conducted in Finnish. The interview questions were structured into two sets. One set was dedicated to understanding the opinions of the interviewees about immigration and multiculturalism. The other set was about the mosque initiative. Further questions were added during the interview if we felt that the answers required further elaboration. We conducted an open-ended analysis of the interviews and interpreted them in the context of the state of the art. Finally, we also reviewed the material presented by the conglomerate introducing their intentions about the architectural concept.

The Finnish Muslim landscape

Most Muslims in Finland are immigrants who entered the country either as quota refugees, asylum seekers or through family reunification (Martikainen & Tiilikainen, 2013, p. 12). The Muslim population in Finland is ethnically diverse and estimated at approximately 70,000 Muslims (Pauha, 2017, p. 248). Most of the Muslim community is from a Sunni background, but there is also a community of Shia. Arabic speakers (30,000) and Somali speakers (21,000) represent roughly 70% of the Muslim community in Finland (Statistics Finland, 2020) in addition to Kurds, Turks, Afghans, Bosnians, and Kosovo Albanians. Most of the prayer rooms in the three municipalities of the Helsinki Metropolitan area were founded by an ethnic community, which is reflected in their leadership board (Hewidy, 2017). Apart from a small wooden property of the Tatar community, 50 km from Helsinki, there are no purpose-built or otherwise recognized mosque buildings in Finland. In 2015, out of 129 Muslim registered associations there were approximately 80 mosque communities (musallas) of which about 30 were in the Helsinki capital region (Pauha, 2017). All the prayer rooms are recycled spaces, and the satisfaction of their users is very low in terms of factors such as ventilation, lack of car

1   Two of the interviewed politicians were from the National Coalition Party and one politician was interviewed from each of the following parties: Green League, Social Democrats, Swedish People, Left Alliance, Finns and Christian Democrats. In addition, one anonymous politician was interviewed. Eight interviewed politicians were members of the decision-making boards (shown on Figure 1). The public servants were the Head of Land Division at the Real Estate Department and the Head of Detailed Planning. The National Coalition Party candidate to the mayor of Helsinki refused interview requests several times.

City Architects &
Planners prepare
documents

The matter is initiated

Processing in
Urban Environment committee

Level 1

3 Interviewees

Processing in
City Board

Level 2

Processing in
City Council

Level 3

5 Interviewees

Office-holder decisions

Decision is implemented

parking spaces, overcrowding and availability of rooms for women (Hewidy, 2017).

Institutionally, most of the Sunni Muslim community is represented by The Finnish Islamic Council (SINE), founded in 2006. SINE has 21 member organizations all over Finland (including both communities and associations). SINE acts as a co-operation, an advisory body and a discussion forum for the Islamic communities of Finland and represents its members in discussions with the authorities. Economically, the percentage of Muslims in the labour market is far lower than their percentage of the population. Compared to the 10% unemployment rate of a native Finn in 2014, the predominantly Muslim background Iraqis, Somalis and Afghans had an unemployment rate exceeding 65% (Aaltonen, Heinonen & Valtonen, 2015). Discrimination against second-generation immigrants in the Finnish labour market is evident; a market, which is described as an ethnically hierarchical market (Ahmad, 2020).

The story of the funders and founders

In 2013, SINE organized an event Islam Expo 3 in Helsinki. The attendees included a Bahraini delegation led by the King's consultant of religious affairs. The delegation visited a prayer room for Friday prayers and was surprised by its poor condition. The head of SINE explained that the condition of all worshipping places is similar due to the lack of resources. The royal consultant promised then to invest efforts to sustain the resources for erecting a purpose-built mosque. In 2014, the initiative to

Figure 1
Structure of decision making and role of city architects and planners[2]

2 Decision making in Helsinki comprises three stages (Figure 1). First, it goes to the relevant board or committee. If the initiative is a planning proposal, the Urban Environment Committee studies the proposal. In case of a high-profile proposal, as the one at hand, it should be displayed before the second decision stage, the City Board. The City Board ratifies the decision and raises it to the highest decision stage, the City Council. The initiative was refused at the first stage of decision making by the Urban Environment Committee.

build a mosque in Helsinki was presented to the Deputy Mayor by a conglomerate of three entities. The original intention was to apply under the Oasis Central Foundation, which was not registered at the time; therefore, an alternative was needed. The first choice was SINE, but the member organizations rejected it. Therefore, a conglomerate was formed consisting of the Finnish Muslim Association (Sunni), the Finnish Association of Muslim Women (Sunni) and the Culture and Religion Forum (FOKUS). The first two were represented by a female native Finn, converted to Islam, and her husband of a Moroccan descent. FOKUS, partly financed by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, was represented by a Christian Finn, a retired male ambassador. According to the conglomerate representative, the Finnish Muslim Association and the Finnish Association of Muslim Women were selected as they both had the same chairperson (the Finn Muslim female), and no opposition was expected from them. However, the Finnish Muslim Association had – like many minority associations with scarce funding – a modest track record in activities, and now the mosque initiative would become its major task. The Finnish Association of Muslim Women was more active in arranging annual events for the wellbeing of Muslim women, and through its involvement it aimed to further raise women's voice in public work and leadership. As a Christian association, FOKUS was involved to be evidence of the intentions that the project was open to interfaith dialogue. Interestingly, some politicians were suspicious about this intention, as indicated by the quote below.

> *It is a mosque for Salafis. It is not a plan of the Finnish Muslims, it is the plan of the Salafis and Mr. R (the retired ambassador's name).*
>
> National Coalition Party Interviewee B

This raises the question of the reason behind describing the mosque as Salafi. Furthermore, there is also a clear contradiction in the above statement, as it combines two opposites: Salafis, portrayed as fundamentalist Muslims, and the FOKUS chairperson who is a part of a Christian organisation. Finally, it implies that Finnish Muslims are not, or should not be, Salafis.

The Muslim community voice regarding the Grand Mosque initiative can be divided into five groups. First, the supporters of the project were mainly Muslims who were not active members of the organised Islamic societies, seeking a neutral Mosque not connected to one ethnicity or group. This group included converted native Finns and young second-generation immigrant Muslims. Second, most Sunni organisations and their leaders supported the project. Third, the Shia community opposed the project. Fourth, a few secular Muslims or ex-Muslims had opposed the project, mostly in social media. Finally, the Somali community opposed the project, and tried to alert the Finnish politicians, claiming that the conglomerate was "under the influence of Saudi-Arabia", "did

not know what it was doing" (as reported by a conglomerate represen-
tative) or being themselves absent from the process as indicated in the
quote below.

> *Somalis feel that they have been left out, that nobody asked them, that*
> *they have not been involved in the planning. Of course, I think that*
> *everybody should be...*
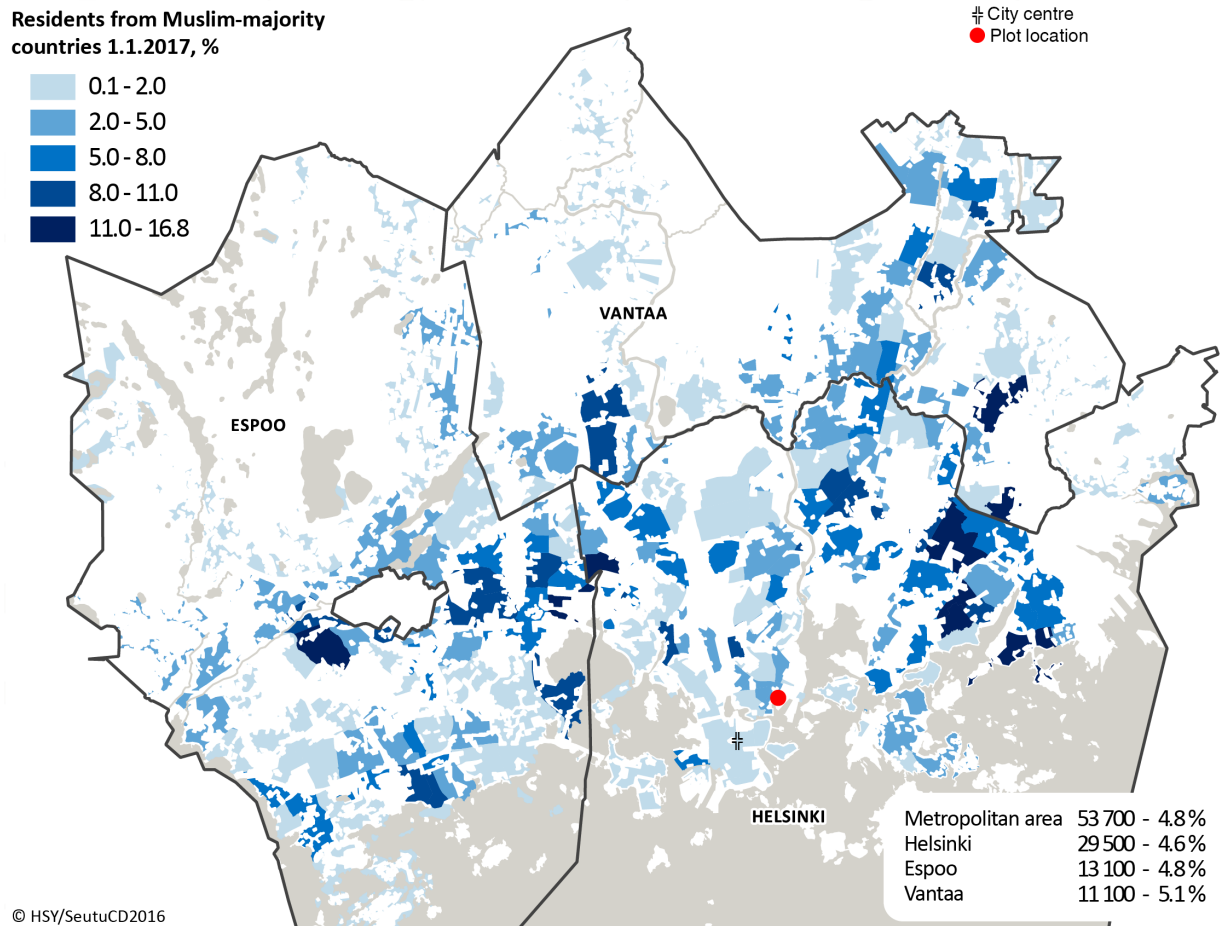
<div align="right">Swedish People's Party Interviewee</div>

The debate raised by politicians about the representation of Somalis
was related to the fair treatment of all subcommunities in the process.
Such concerns showed the lack of knowledge about similar projects in
European cities. For example, Bangladeshi and Pakistani in the UK have
separate mosques without excluding each other from enjoying their ser-
vices. Interestingly, this is also the case of prayer rooms in Finland, most
of which are founded and led by one ethnic group. On 12 December 2017,
the Urban Environment Committee unanimously decided to reject the
proposal to reserve a plot for building a grand mosque in Helsinki. The
conglomerate withdrew the application before the City Board revision,
where the committee's decision should have been ratified (see Fig. 1 for
decision making process and footnote 2).

What was wrong?

The trap: spatial pattern, location and size

Varady (2008, p. 60) argued that Muslim segregation is mainly a result
of self-segregation, "a desire to remain near relatives, friends, mosques
and other Muslim-oriented institutions". Agrawal (2008) classified faith-
based ethnic residential communities as "planned" and "organic evolve-
ments." However, this is not the case in the Helsinki capital region,
consisting of the municipalities of Helsinki, Espoo, Vantaa and Kauni-
ainen. The dispersal of immigrants in Helsinki "differs most from that
of the natives and the index of tenure segmentation is high [compared
to Copenhagen, Oslo and Stockholm], especially for non-Western im-
migrants" (Andersen, Turner & Søholt, 2013, p. 15). This is due to a high
overrepresentation of immigrants in social housing estates. Dhalmann
(2013, p. 403) stated that "discriminating behaviour of private landlords
had reduced Somalis' willingness to seek housing outside the more
trusted public sector". The prohibition of housing mortgage for Muslims
is an obstacle to promoting their housing career (Kauppinen & Vilkama,
2016). Therefore, the segregation of Muslims is not voluntary in nature,
nor is it planned, but an organic evolvement relevant to the geographi-
cal concentration of rental public sector estates at a few locations. Hel-
sinki Integration Policy in 1999 aimed to house immigrants "as equally
as possible" (Helsinki Integration Policy, 1999, p. 23, in Vilkama, 2006).

Figure 2
Muslims' spatial pattern (HSY/Seutu-CD2016 in Hewidy & Lilius, 2018) and the suggested location (red dot)

 However, there is a lack of effective tools for policy implementation, and the policies were influenced by international debates on ethnic segregation (Dhalmann & Vilkama, 2009).

At the beginning of 2017, the Muslim population in Helsinki (Fig. 2) was estimated at 29,500 (4.6% of Helsinki population), in Espoo at 13,100 (4.8% of Espoo population) and in Vantaa at 11,100 (5.1% of Vantaa population). Interestingly, the population of Muslims has evenly doubled in their overrepresentation areas every eight years 2000–2008–2016 (Hewidy & Lilius, 2018). Despite the aim of social mixing, the overrepresentation is evident: by rough calculation, 70% of Muslim inhabitants in Helsinki reside in three out of the eight major districts. For the initiative comprising a mosque and a multipurpose centre complex, the City of Helsinki suggested a site in the developing district of Kalasatama ("Fish Harbour") close to the metro station (Figure 3). The area of the proposed plot was one hectare (10,000 m2), with a maximum building efficiency of 2.0. The estimated floor space was initially 18,400 m², reduced to 15,000 m² upon the city's feedback, with an initial construction cost of €116 million.

Figure 3
The suggested location
AUTHOR EDITING BASED ON THE SUBMITTED BRO-
CHURE BY CONGLOMERATE

Based on the spatial analysis, there were a few shortcomings with the suggested plot: its location and urban characteristics as well as the size of the project. First, although the location is close to a metro station, the demographic structure (Figure 1) shows that the location is in a *white* area and the percentage of Muslim population in its surroundings is hardly 2–5 percent. Recalling the role of mosques as urban hub centres that normally enhance their neighbourhood public life (e.g., Simonsen et al., 2019; Mack, 2020), this project would have been an isolated complex. Second, the building efficiency of 2.0 of one hectare plot has no logical reasoning behind it. The conglomerate informed the authors that in the application phase there was no preferred area, nor a space programme.

Accordingly, they found themselves reacting to the suggested plot devel-
opment objectives by the city. Moreover, the extent of the mosque pro-
posal was seen exaggerated both functionally and symbolically and as a
source of fear; thus, size has been used as a reason to oppose the project.
Opposing the term "Grand Mosque" was, in line with Tamimi Arab (2013),
a sign of the *megamosque genre* that has been amplified to be an inside
occupation, as indicated below:

> *I'm not against mosques, but the idea of a big, grand mosque […] the
> word grand has the feeling of a big negative word. [The mosque] is
> an idea to occupy the country from inside. Initiatives of building big
> mosques come from those countries of radicalised Islam interpreta-
> tions.*

Figure 4
Aerial perspective for the plot location
and its surrounding development
AUTHOR EDITING BASED ON THE SUBMITTED BRO-
CHURE BY CONGLOMERATE

Christian Democrats Interviewee

Third, the plot is central and of a high value as it is in Kalasatama area (Figure 4), one of the largest new areas to be built in Helsinki. The area is a former industrial port that has already been transformed into a district of more than 5,000 people and thousands of new jobs and will grow to host 25,000 in total by 2040. However, with the integration policy of housing immigrants as equally as possible (Vilkama, 2006), there is doubt that the Muslims' population in the area would grow to form a congregation "supply area" (e.g., Maussen, 2009). Consequently, there was opposition based on the property value (e.g., Allievi, 2009), which has been capitalised by politicians, as indicated by the quote below. Therefore, for the previous points, we call such shortcoming *the trap.*

> *It is not sustainable: the funding will not be enough, and a valuable plot will be left unused, or it would be beyond the available resources […] I will reject it on such grounds*
>
> National Coalition Party Interviewee B

Planners and architecture

The conglomerate submitted material that architecturally acknowledged the centrality of the suggested plot. They further informed the city planners of their intention to arrange an architectural competition. Moreover, in 2015 the conglomerate presented to the city planners a few references of Islamic multifunctional complex projects in European cities. Among more than ten projects, the city planners appreciated the winning entry of a two-stage architecture competition of Library-Museum-Mosque complex in Tirana, Albania (Figure 5). However, once the mosque initiative got media attention, it became clear that it was not properly represented. In April 2017 (Figure 6), the newspaper Ilta-Sanomat published a 3D virtual image that was deliberately chosen to look like traditional Ottoman mosques – not at all coinciding with the intentions of the initiative founders. This visual misrepresentation was an excellent example of situating the project as a foreign building in the city.

In September 2017, the city architects prepared two perspectives (Figures 7–8) using neutral architecture to examine the proportions of the building masses to the surroundings and reduce the debates heated by the Ottoman mosques. The perspectives showed a two-phase construction. However, these were not widely shared by the media and were only circulated among other official documents between city experts and politicians. The influence of the Tirana project (Figure 5) was reflected in the perspectives through allocating the *minaret* as a separate structure, a landmark in the main external yard. In 2017, the head of the Real Estate Department of Helsinki met the Bahraini Royal consultant, visiting Helsinki for this purpose, to discuss the financing of the mosque project. The Land Division at the Real Estate Department of Helsinki later requested an estimate of the operating expenses of the project, to which the con-
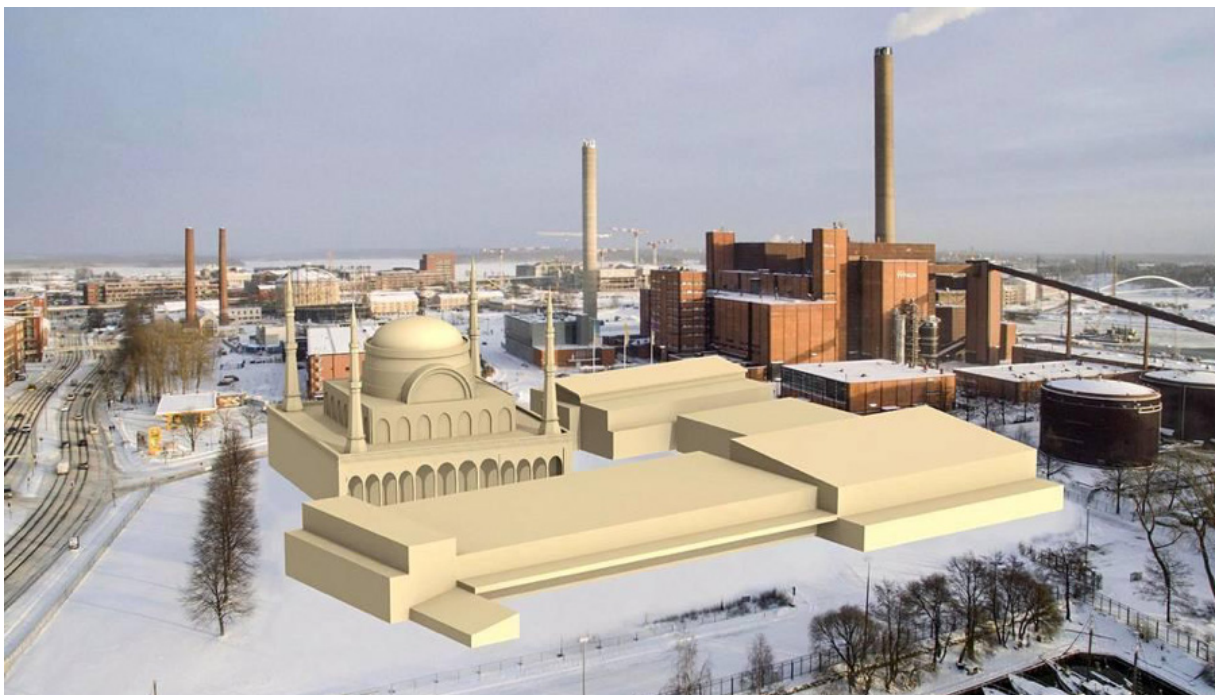
Figure 5 (top)
The city-appreciated architectural concept, winning entry of Tirana Library-Museum-Mosque competition by Danish architects BIG
SOURCE: FROM POWERPOINT PRESENTED BY CONGLOMERATE TO THE CITY, CITED AS AN ONLINE MATERIAL: HTTPS://COMPETITIONS.ORG/2017/07/RESTORING-AND-REINVENTING-ALBANIAN-IDENTITY-A-NEW-MOSQUE-AND-MUSEUM-OF-TIRANA-RELIGIOUS-HARMONY2/

Figure 6 (below)
3D virtual model titled: This is how Helsinki's 140-million-euro mosque may look (Ilta-Sanomat newspaper. 3 April 2017)

glomerate responded.

In contrast to the shortcomings of proposing the location, the find-ings showed interesting achievements in treating the question of the expected architecture where planners gained experience for acting as problem solvers and integration agents. In line with Mack (2019), the Finnish planners found themselves faced by challenges for which they had no previous experience to deal with. However, the prepared perspec-tives were crucial not only to calm down the debates in the media, but they were also used as the material presented to the politicians to draw a neutral image of the mosque. Furthermore, the perspectives reflected the planners' awareness of the sensitivity of the traditional *minaret* de-bates. Finally, the meeting held with the funder's representative, as well as requesting a report of the expected operating expenses, showed their willingness to prepare answers for the potential questions that could be

Figure 7
The perspective by the city's architects
in September 2017, phase I
SOURCE: THE DOCUMENTS PREPARED BY THE CITY
PLANNERS PRESENTED TO POLITICIANS

asked by the politicians.

Political reasoning

In 2019, the Mayor of Helsinki posted on his blog:

*I am proud that I helped to reject the Grand Mosque initiative after the
last elections. But I am also proud that I brought Helsinki as the second
city in accordance with the objectives of the UN report for sustainable
development. I evaluated both decisions in reference to the city's over-
all good. (27 September 2019)*

(Author translation)

This statement, being a contradiction in terms (ignoring the need for a
purpose-built mosque and praising Helsinki's progress in reaching the
Agenda 2030 goals), shows well that the mayor had not considered the
social and cultural sustainability of the Muslim minority; the Muslim
community did not count in the overall good. The array of arguments
that the interviewed politicians used were similar. The opponents argued
heavily that minorities would have to be obedient and avoid attracting
special attention, let alone be given visibility in the form of a purposely
built mosque. The supporters leaned more eagerly on underlining the
rights of minorities to be treated equally and the right of the initiative to
be decided on, as if it was an ordinary matter. However, there were con-
siderable differences in the opinion landscape. Immigration and multi-
culturalism were acknowledged by the interviewees of the Left Alliance,

Green League, Social Democrats and Swedish People's Party.

[The mosque] would add [the symbolic meaning] that Helsinki is truly a city that welcomes diversity, that is actually open and is European, modern. Not scared. I mean about new things, not scared about people meeting each other. [...] It would make it more real, the idea that we are, sort of, really a big city in Europe and an important city where people feel welcome, all kinds of people.

Swedish People's Party Interviewee

The Christian Democrats interviewee stated that the chance of a multicultural society, if feasible at all, would have to be of assimilative nature: "[Immigrants] Go by the rules of the country or move out!". One National Coalition Party interviewee described multicultural society as "those who come to work in Finland are exactly the types we need." Both National Coalition Party interviewees adopted the idea of a homogeneous nation stating:

Finland as a nation and a cultural environment is very homogenous. There are not many people who do not follow the same cultural tenets that all of us do. You go to the sauna, you watch ice hockey, you drink beer. You can still be a proper, nice Finn without doing any of these. But we actually have so few people who do not participate in the same rituals.

National Coalition Party Interviewee B

Gender segregation is something that we don't like in the Nordic countries. We like gender equality; this will always be a point of friction.... in swimming lessons in schools some parents have insisted that their girls should not be in the same swimming lessons with boys. As a Nordic imperialist, I think they should just obey the law. I never use the word multiculturalism. I hate it. I'm a liberal and a legalistic person I think the basic idea is that everybody should obey the law, and everybody should just be individually able to choose their lifestyles.

National Coalition Party Interviewee A

Politicians from the National Coalition, Christian Democrats and Finns parties have set expectations for immigrants: to be employed, respect the Nordic values without disturbing the homogenous culture, and to go by the rules. The authors noticed that in a few interviews the word *immigrants* was used as a synonym for Muslims, which reflects the politicians' perception of them as strangers. Furthermore, using the notion of *gender segregation* shows the lack of knowledge about religion; the community seeking to build a mosque was observant by nature: regardless of their ethnic backgrounds, *gender segregation* (accurately *separation*) is a core value in their faith. Such an opposition is based on refusing the oppression of women and its conflicts with mainstream values (e.g., Allievi, 2009). When focusing on the standpoints for and against the

mosque, the argument landscape became even more polarized. Politicians brought the Sunni-Shia question to the debate several times. First, by assuming potential conflicts between them in a transnational setting, as informed by the National Coalition Party interviewee B. Second, by not being aware that the two sects do not use each other's mosques. In line Pauha and Konttori (2020), it was a sign of religious illiteracy preventing politicians from making a fact-based decision.

> [The mosque] not only divides the Sunni and Shia communities, but it splits the people's country of origin. I would say that regarding this project I don't think that people probably assume that Sunnis and Shias wouldn't use the same mosque, perhaps it is better to unite different groups and nationalities.
> Helsinki Deputy mayor, Green League Interviewee

Among the expertise collected by the city officials of the plot department, there was little evidence to corroborate the wide array of claims opposing the mosque. The Ministry of the Foreign Affairs did bring up the tense situation between the countries of the Gulf and pointed out that the tensions between different religions [sects] can be reflected in Finland through projects such as the Grand Mosque initiative. The Ministry also drew attention to the lack of information on the funding of the project. Some politicians saw a conspiracy scenario and assumed that the funding was originally from Saudi Arabia.

> It would be Saudi funding, it is coming via Bahrain, but Saudis are doing it all around... Bahrain is a Shia majority, small island, and the Saudis are keeping the Sunni government in office by channelling a lot of funding via the Bahrain finance....So you would have imams who are trained in Saudi Arabia, you would have ultra-conservative Wahhabis.
> National Coalition Party Interviewee B

Interestingly, the Finnish Minister for Foreign Affairs received an official letter from his Bahraini counterpart dated 26 February 2017. The letter confirmed that the Kingdom supported the project on the basis of "tolerance, coexistence, integration, moderation and rejection of extremism." During our study, this letter was never mentioned to us by anyone nor was it attached to the statement of the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs. The authors only know of it as the conglomerate representative interviewee handed them a digital copy. The Migration Institute report considered the biggest challenges of the project to be funding and its influence, potential conflicts in Muslim community and distribution of power between Shia and Sunni. The report drew the city to consider not only the suitability of the project for the built environment, but also gave examples of some EU countries that have issued regulations restricting foreign funding for mosques. Finally, the anonymous interviewee described the conglomerate as naïve. The findings showed that

the conglomerate did their best to their limited knowledge; however, the project needed better campaigning and capitalising the influence of its supporters. Moreover, the conglomerate was under much pressure from the media and their response was modest.

If I were sitting on a huge amount of money in Bahrain, I would look for stronger links in Helsinki than the conglomerate [...] they do not have the professional skills [...] They should have created networks of different interests to be very persuasive and hire a public relation agency.

Anonymous Interviewee

Rejected before presented

The empirical research corroborates what earlier studies have shown: erecting a purpose-built mosque in a European city is a multi-faceted effort, but above all, politically very sensitive and therefore prone to fail. As Göle (2011, p. 383) framed it, visibility of Islam in urban space through purpose-built mosques is "a form of agency, a manifestation of religious difference that cannot be thought independent of the materiality of culture, namely aesthetic forms, dress codes or architectural genres". Below, the article concludes the study, first by answering both research questions and second by making recommendations regarding planning policy.

Regarding the first question, the planners in the city did their best to treat the initiative as if it were a project like any other. Before the moment of decision *taking* by the Urban Environment Committee (and the planned ratification by the City Board), there was a long process of decision *making*, i.e., the preparatory work done by the city officials (see Figure 1). This could have allowed reducing the sense of controversy and concentrating on the ordinary, i.e., on the questions of providing facilities for a community. In line with Mack (2019), the city planners found themselves faced by challenges, which they had no previous experience to deal with. However, they did prepare statements and materials that presented a neutral image of the mosque to the politicians and might have helped to calm down the debates in the media, heated by the Ottoman concept perspective. Furthermore, the city architects simplified the building masses to harmonise the architecture with Helsinki cityscape (e.g., Maussen, 2009; Mack, 2015). Finally, the meeting held with the funder's representative, as well as a request to provide a report of the expected operating expenses, showed the willingness to negotiate, including preparing answers for the questions that the politicians might ask. Therefore, the authors argue that planners did act as integration agents.

Regarding the second question, the article argues that the initiative was treated differently from other projects. In line with Allievi (2013), the discussion about the initiative converted the project into a *non-normal*

building, and the mosque became a *political* issue for several reasons. First, in line with Pauha & Konttori (2020), the knowledge of politicians about religious practice was not decisive: the Urban Environment Committee members had no way out of the sphere of the extraordinary, and that sphere was dominated by the project opponents. It is not fair, and equally naïve, to simplify the city of Helsinki's relation with the Muslim communities in terms of Middle Eastern geopolitics; most of the vague arguments by the politicians were transnational. In the official documents reviewed for this research, we did not find a single positive example of a successful case from abroad, *best practice*. On the contrary, the project was dealt with only in a problem-oriented attitude. The Järva Lift plan in Stockholm studied by Mack (2015; 2019; 2020) and the mosque integrative policy in Rotterdam introduced by Maussen (2009) would be good references for politicians to learn from. Moreover, politicians repeatedly used terms such as *Wahhabis* and *Salafist,* portraying both as if not Muslims. Second, funding was accused of being a donation from radical states and described as a trade for influence and power. However, suspicion about funding is also rooted in transnationalism. Third, politicians used arguments such as *gender "segregation"*, *Finnish homogeneous culture* and *Nordic values*. In fact, such arguments criticise Islam *per se,* not the mosque project. We draw on Habermas (2009; 2011) and Asad (2003) to argue that such opinions are based on the secular and liberal public sphere that ignores religious groups. We further draw on Maussen (2009) to argue that in dealing with Muslims, there is a need to change the tone of the alleged supremacy of secularism under notions such as Nordic values, and instead create a recognition of difference (e.g., Göle, 2011). Fourth, the argument that "Somalis were not fairly treated" is more proof that politicians lack the knowledge or ignore that over 30 prayer rooms in the Helsinki Metropolitan area are already operated by single ethnic groups. Fifth, a major shortcoming creating debates was the size. In fact, the size was a consequence of the suggested plot by the city (large area plot of high building efficiency). The city has not referred to the current, and mostly the future, spatial pattern of Muslims to determine the mosque supply area (as by Maussen, 2009). Furthermore, the case shows that the material form of the mosque was not the main opposition, but rather "the scale of public spheres in which the project was contested" (Dehanas & Pieri, 2011, p. 803). Finally, being politically inexperienced, the conglomerate could not effectively respond to criticism. The opposing Muslim groups (Shia and few Somalis) used it, and the politicians capitalised it. Therefore, the authors argue that politicians were the gatekeepers in the process.

The article, thus, sets a few recommendations regarding purpose-built mosques in Helsinki. First, a mosque project should be treated as an ordinary urban matter and a public good for the wellbeing of the Finnish Muslim community. Accordingly, accommodating Muslims is essential (Modood, 2012), and the mosque is to be reflected in planning policy, in

the so-called normalisation process (Maussen, 2009). Second, this will be possible only by reducing the high sensitivity to segregation and carefully studying services needed by Muslims. Helsinki Immigrant Policy aims for an equal dispersal policy (Vilkama, 2006), but integrating immigrants should not be merely simplified in anti-segregation policy. The overrepresentation of Muslims is taking place anyhow in three districts of Helsinki (Hewidy & Lilius, 2018). Thus, the article further suggests that the city of Helsinki plans for mosques in the areas where Muslims reside. Furthermore, with the lack of resources, a funding mechanism should be invented as part of the normalisation process. Third, spatial patterns and demographic maps are essential in location decision making. Moreover, the size and space programme should be in proportion with the supply area and the expected congregation. Otherwise, without normalizing the mosque issue, Finnish Muslims will be excluded from the urban space and many politicians will be proud of the exclusion.

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