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Beyond Islamophobia: unpacking economic motivations in South Korea's Mosque construction debates

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Abstract

This study delves into the contentious discourse surrounding the construction of a mosque in Daehyun-dong, Daegu City, South Korea, which has persisted from 2021 to the present. It examines the interplay between economic interests and cultural conflicts involving Muslim migrants and the local Korean population. Through the fieldwork research, including interviews with residents and migrant Muslim communities, the research moves beyond the conventional narrative of Islamophobia to uncover the underlying economic and sociocultural dynamics at play. It reveals that the opposition to the mosque is not merely a result of religious intolerance but is significantly influenced by financial concerns, including real estate values and development prospects. By examining the specific case of the proposed mosque near

the local National University, the study highlights the complexities of integrating migrant Muslim communities into non-Muslim societies, where economic factors play a pivotal role in shaping local responses. The findings challenge the simplistic attribution of such conflicts to cultural or religious differences, suggesting a need for a more nuanced understanding of the multifaceted nature of community opposition to migrant initiatives. This research contributes to broader discussions on migration, integration, and urban development in multicultural contexts.

Studi ini meneliti tentang wacana kontroversial seputar pembangunan masjid di Daehyun-dong, Kota Daegu, Korea Selatan, yang telah berlangsung sejak 2021 hingga saat ini. Studi ini meneliti interaksi antara kepentingan ekonomi dan konflik budaya yang melibatkan migran Muslim dan penduduk lokal Korea. Melalui penelitian lapangan, termasuk wawancara dengan penduduk dan komunitas Muslim migran, penelitian ini bergerak melampaui narasi konvensional Islamofobia untuk mengungkap dinamika ekonomi dan sosial budaya yang mendasarinya. Studi ini mengungkap bahwa penentangan terhadap masjid bukan hanya akibat intoleransi agama, tetapi juga sangat dipengaruhi oleh masalah keuangan, termasuk nilai real estat dan prospek pembangunan. Dengan meneliti kasus khusus masjid yang diusulkan di dekat Universitas Nasional setempat, studi ini menyoroti kompleksitas integrasi komunitas Muslim migran ke dalam masyarakat non-Muslim, di mana faktor ekonomi memainkan peran penting dalam membentuk respons lokal. Temuan ini menantang atribusi sederhana dari konflik tersebut dengan perbedaan budaya atau agama, yang menunjukkan perlunya pemahaman yang lebih bernuansa tentang sifat multifaset dari penentangan komunitas terhadap inisiatif migran. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada diskusi yang lebih luas tentang migrasi, integrasi, dan pembangunan perkotaan dalam konteks multikultural.

Keywords: *Muslim in Korea; Mosque in Korea; Migrant Muslims; Islamophobia*

Introduction

The conflict over the construction of a mosque in Daegu, South Korea, which began in February 2021, continues even after the Korean Supreme Court's decision on September 16, 2022. The Court rejected a suspension request by residents, affirming that religious activities cannot be obstructed

due to bias against a particular religion. This ruling reinforced the constitutional principles of religious freedom and anti-discrimination, which were significant amidst South Korea's push towards a multicultural society. Despite this legal validation, opposition from some residents and anti-Islam groups remains, exhibiting persistent Islamophobia. Previously, Muslim migrants were largely unnoticed in Korean society until 2018, when approximately 500 Yemeni asylum seekers arrived, heightening their visibility.[1] This newfound awareness has, unfortunately, sparked a 'liquid fear' among the public, fueled by sensationalized and false media portrayals. While the prevailing narrative attributes local resistance to the influx of Muslims to Islamophobia, this study challenges that simplification, exploring deeper social dynamics beyond mere prejudice.

This article contends that framing Islamophobia as a significant factor in the opposition to the mosque construction in front of Kyungpook National University, located in Daegu, Korea, merely skims the surface. Based on the field research, especially the interviews, it posits that such claims predominantly serve as a strategic deception to contest the mosque's establishment. It further posits that the primary impetus for this resistance is entrenched in economic motivations. Specifically, it uncovers that economic and socio-cultural dynamics, notably real estate values and development prospects, constitute the conflict's core underpinnings. In essence, this study underscores that the purported fear of migrants, depicted as the 'Other,' encroaching upon and detrimentally affecting the economic, social, and cultural integrity of the indigenous population

[1]Gi Yeon Koo, "The Refugee Crisis Reveals Our Humanity", *Changbi*, Vol.46, No.3 (2018): 401-412; Soojeong Yi, "Survival War of Migrant Muslims in Korea Based on 'Recognition Struggle' by Axel Honneth", *JIMES*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (2021), 31-56; Gi Yeon and Yilsoon Paek, "Muslim refugees in South Korean society through the hospitality: A Comparative Study of Yemen refugees and Afghanistan Special Contributors", *Space and Environment*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (2023), 8-49.

as they merge into mainstream society, is merely a superficial concern. It positions such apprehensions about Islamophobia as a secondary, more visible layer of opposition, whereas the genuine, deeper-rooted motivations pertain to economic, cultural, and social factors—particularly the concern over migrants infringing upon the majority's benefits. It is suggested that the parties involved employ a veneer of Islamophobia for public persuasion, aiming to legitimize their aversion towards migrants in a socially acceptable manner, whereas, in reality, substantial and personal economic, social, and cultural interests are at stake. This analysis endeavors to move beyond the reductive interpretation of the Muslim migrant conflict in South Korean society as mere Islamophobia, aiming to elucidate the debate's complex nature. Furthermore, it underscores the need for a more discerning and nuanced approach to navigating these intricate dynamics.

This research began in August 2018 by interviewing stakeholders of the then Musallah near Kyungpook National University. From 2018 to December 2020, Soojeong Yi collected qualitative data across six field sessions, focusing on the religious lives of Muslim students in Korea and fundraising for mosque construction. Following the onset of the mosque construction dispute in February 2021, Gi Yeon Koo joined the project. The researchers conducted bi-monthly visits and interviews at the site until January 2023 to track the conflict's progression and gather stakeholder insights. Overall, 27 individuals were interviewed, including Muslim students (4), Muslim interpreters (4), university faculty member (9), local residents (2), a Christian representative(1), members from the Korean Muslim Federation(4), and Korean public officials(3). This comprehensive approach allowed for an in-depth and balanced analysis of the conflict, distinguishing this study from previous research.

Islamophobia or social exclusion of migrant

Islamophobia and the social exclusion of migrants often interact as both cause and effect, sometimes simultaneously, with each reinforcing the other's legitimacy. Islamophobia can ostracize Muslim migrants from societal participation or act as a precursor to their social exclusion. Paradoxically, as social exclusion worsens, Islamophobia tends to intensify. Notably, after the events of 9/11, discrimination against migrants, which was already present, escalated as fears of Muslim terrorism grew. This fear of Islam has been exploited to further the social exclusion of migrants, serving both as a means and a goal.[2] The concept of Islamophobia was first recognized in London in the late 1980s, highlighting instances of anti-Muslim discrimination. Its significant emergence into public and political discourse followed the Runnymede Trust's report "Islamophobia: a challenge for us all: report of the Runnymede Trust Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia" in 1997. This report marked a critical juncture in acknowledging and understanding the phenomenon.[3]

Beydoun analyzes Islamophobia in the U.S. by identifying three dimensions: "private," "structural," and "dialectical" Islamophobia. He suggests that, at a personal level, Muslims face fear, skepticism, and hostility from non-governmental actors.[4] Institutionally, fear and distrust towards Muslims are perpetuated by state and organizational policies. Dialectically, these institutional attitudes shape public perceptions, affecting views on Islam and Muslims both domestically and internationally. This framework casts American Muslims as incompatible with U.S. values and citizenship,

[2]James Rhodes, "Revisiting the 2001 riots: New Labour and the rise of 'colour blind racism'", *Sociological Research Online*, Vol. 14, No. 5 (2009), 80-91.

[3]Christopher Allen, "Justifying Islamophobia: A post-9/11 consideration of the European Union and British contexts", *American Journal of Islam and Society*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (2004), 1-25.

[4]Khaled A Beydoun, *American Islamophobia: Understanding the roots and rise of fear,* Univ of California Press, 2018.

portraying them as antagonistic, which can justify violence against them. Similar studies in Greece and the UK show that in predominantly non-Muslim societies, Muslims are often seen as the 'Other,' intensifying fears among citizens.[5] However, the controversy surrounding the construction of a Muslim Mosque in Daegu, Korea, transcends the simple framework of Islamophobia. Economic factors, such as the stakes of investors in real estate assets, play a significant role in fueling the conflict. This situation raises pertinent questions: How have Muslims transitioned from being unseen neighbors to apparent entities within Korean society? What prompts the swift shift in attitudes of Korean residents from accepting Muslims to harboring hostility against them?

Koo's anthropological study describes "Islamophobia without Muslims" in Korea as a phenomenon based on imagined fears in a society with few Muslim residents.[6] Until 2018, Korean media coverage of Muslims was primarily influenced by international events like the 9/11 attacks. Between 2014 and 2018, intensified media focus on ISIS atrocities further entrenched negative stereotypes about Islam. [7] The 2018 arrival of around 500 Yemeni refugees on Jeju Island crystallized these fears, transforming them into explicit Islamophobia and sparking substantial backlash. This marked a significant shift in the presence and perception of Muslim migrants in Korean society.[8] The entrenched Orientalist narrative framing "poor Muslim women" as needing liberation from "barbaric" Muslim men

[5]Alexandros Sakellariou, "Fear of Islam in Greece: migration, terrorism, and "ghosts" from the past", *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (2017), 511-523.; Waqas Tufail & Scott Poynting, "Muslim and dangerous:'Grooming'and the politics of racialization", In *Fear of Muslims? International Perspectives on Islamophobia*, Douglas Pratt and Rachel Woodlock (Eds.), 2016, 79-92.

[6]Gi Yeon Koo, "Islamophobia and the Politics of Representation..., 159-192.; Gi Yeon Koo, "The Refugee Crisis Reveals Our Humanity..., 401-412.

[7]Gi Yeon Koo, "Islamophobia and the Politics of Representation…, 159-192.

[8]Gi Yeon Koo, "Islamophobia and the Politics of Representation..., 159-192.; Gi Yeon Koo, "The Refugee Crisis Reveals Our Humanity..., 401-412.

gained further traction after the 9/11 attacks. This period marked a shift towards the 'hyper-visibility of the Muslim body,' casting Muslim men, especially in the West, as inherently violent and dangerous.[9] Media often depicted these men as Islamic Fundamentalists and terrorists, oppressors of "poor Muslim women."[10] Consequently, security discourse around Muslim migrants has frequently positioned Muslims, particularly Muslim men, as threats in societies where they are viewed as the 'Other.'[11] Post-9/11 racial and gender discriminatory politics, combined with Korea's anti-multiculturalism stance, provided a global context to Islamophobia in Korea, intensifying with the refugee controversy.[12] Sohoon Yi and Juwon Yuk analyze the Daegu Mosque dispute as an example of contested racism in South Korea. [13] They introduce the concept of "liquid fear" [14] to explain the generalized prejudices against Islam—like fear and anxiety—that the local population uses to emphasize their perceived victimization and vulnerability. This fear shapes the local opposition to the religious practices and community efforts of the migrant Muslim community, framing it within a broader context of pervasive Islamophobia. This opposition is often viewed as a defense against the perceived threats posed by Muslims, furthering discussions on Islamophobia, the reinforcement of negative

[9]Sherene H Razack, "Imperilled Muslim women, dangerous Muslim men and civilised Europeans: Legal and social responses to forced marriages", *Feminist legal studies*, Vol. 12 (2004), 130.

[10]Lila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim women really need saving? Anthropological reflections on cultural relativism and its others", *American anthropologist*, Vol. 104, No. 3 (2002), 783-790.

[11]Anand, Dibyesh, "The violence of security: Hindu nationalism and the politics of representing 'the Muslim'as a danger", *The Round Table*, Vol. 94, No. 379 (2005), 203-215.

[12]Euyryung Jun, "'Dangerous Muslim Men' and 'Special Contributors': The Complicity between Global Humanitarian Politics and Post-9/11 Regime", *SNUACAR*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (2022), 3-31.

[13]Joowon and Yi Yuk, Sohoon, "Racism in Disguise: Islamophobia and Daegu Daruleeman Islamic Mosque", *Asian Review*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (2022), 33-65.

[14]Gi Yeon Koo, "Islamophobia and the Politics of Representation..., 159-192.; Gi Yeon Koo, "The Refugee Crisis Reveals Our Humanity..., 401-412.

racial stereotypes, and racism in Korean society.

The question arises: Can Islamophobia and racism unequivocally serve as comprehensive explanations for the residents' opposition and marginalization of migrant Muslim community activities? Notably, the musallah had been operational in the area since 2014, and there was no opposition from the local population when the researchers commenced their study in 2018, continuing worship at the exact location. This raises the inquiry: Why have Muslim migrants, previously accepted, now become perceived as the 'Other,' deemed unacceptable and feared? The full recognition of Muslims as the 'Other' precipitates intercultural comparisons and the ensuing hierarchies.[15] Furthermore, the acknowledgment of cultures under the guise of multiculturalism is reserved for those already familiar, intensifying the exclusion of so-called exotic cultures.[16] When migrants are seen as culturally different and integrated into society, perceptions that they threaten economic interests can intensify their social exclusion.[17] When societal competition for limited resources involves migrants, this often results in increased antipathy, discrimination, and exclusion.[18] In the United Kingdom, for instance, despite a lack of evidence linking migrant influxes to employment or income losses among specific groups, antipathy towards migrants has grown among the working class, often fueled by political agendas.[19] This pattern of working-class resistance

[15]Jongil Lee, "Different Understandings of 'the Other' and Their Implications to Multicultural Education", *RSSE*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2008), 1-20.

[16]Clive Harris, "Beyond multiculturalism? Difference, recognition and social justice", *Patterns of prejudice*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (2001), 13-34.

[17]Robert Ford, *Acceptable and Unacceptable Migrants: How opposition to immigration is affected by migrants' region of origin*, Citeseer, 2009; Alexander Kustov, "'Bloom where you're planted': explaining public opposition to (e) migration", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 5 (2022), 1113-1132.

[18]Rick August, *Strategies for achieving equity and prosperity in Saskatchewan*, Caledon Institute of Social Policy, 2006.

[19]Ian Patel, *We're Here Because You Were There: Immigration and the End of Empire*, Verso Books, 2021.

to migrants, seen as competitors in the labor market, is observed globally.[20] The conflict over the mosque in Daegu is particularly contentious due to its association with real estate—a critical economic resource in Korean society and a means of securing steady income.[21] Initially, the Muslim community's decision to rent buildings for worship provided residents with a source of rental income. However, the community's subsequent choice to construct its structure for religious purposes has resulted in the residents' loss of rental income. Additionally, the perceived impact on surrounding real estate values, fueled by the presence of foreigners, has led to anticipated depreciation across the region, severely affecting the economic resources of the local population. Consequently, there is pronounced resentment towards foreign migrants due to their perceived detrimental impact on the community's financial structure—whether this perception aligns with reality.

Consequently, the perception of Muslims involved in the Daegu Mosque conflict transitioned from being seen as 'Good Muslims' to 'Bad Muslims.' Awareness of Muslims as integral members of society precipitates cultural comparisons, leading to an awareness of the social status between residents and migrant Muslims.[22] Acknowledgment of other cultures within the framework of multiculturalism is often limited to familiar ones, resulting in stronger exclusion against so-called exotic cultures.[23] The dichotomy of 'Good Muslim and Bad Muslim' has rapidly increased in Western discourse, notably in the United Kingdom and the United

[20]Hannah Lewis, Peter Dwyer, Stuart Hodkinson & Louise Waite, "Hyper-precarious lives: Migrants, work and forced labour in the Global North", *Progress in human geography*, Vol. 39, No. 5 (2015), 580-600; Nandita Rani Sharma, *Home economics: Nationalism and the making of 'migrant workers' in Canada*, University of Toronto Press, 2006.

[21]Kyung-Hwan Kim, "Housing and the Korean economy", *Journal of Housing Economics*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (2004), 321-341.

[22]Jongil Lee, "Different Understandings of 'the Other'..., 1-20.

[23]Clive Harris, "Beyond multiculturalism?..., 13-34.

States after the 9/11 attacks, influencing both political and social spheres before becoming a subject of academic inquiry.[24] This binary suggests that Muslims can only assimilate into other societies if they are categorized as 'Good Muslims' or maintain a moderate stance.[25]

Initially, the migrant Muslims in Daegu, by living quietly and using rented spaces for religious practices, were considered 'Good Muslims.' However, the onset of mosque construction marked them as 'Bad Muslims' due to the external expression of their religiosity. Previously, their religious identity was not strongly emphasized, and their contributions to the local economy through rent were valued. Yet, their decision to construct a mosque and the visible markers of their faith shifted public perception, aligning them with the negative stereotypes fueled by Islamophobia in Korean society. The transition from 'invisible Good Muslims' to 'visible Bad Muslims' has led to their ostracization within the community. This shift underscores how expressions of Islamic identity, irrespective of any links to terrorism or extremism, can result in being labeled as 'bad Muslims,' highlighting the profound impact of societal perceptions and the complexities of integrating into a local community. Carolin Emcke's analysis in "Against Hate" further illustrates how visibility as the 'Other' can transform individuals into targets of hatred, drawing parallels with the experiences of Muslims in Daegu who, from being hidden neighbors, have become conspicuous and marginalized.[26]

The invisible 'good Muslim' in Daegu

In the Daegu and Gyeongsan regions, nine mosques are predominantly situated near industrial parks and within residential or commercial

[24]Mahmood Mamdani, "Good Muslim, bad Muslim: A political perspective on culture and terrorism", *American anthropologist*, Vol. 104, No. 3 (2002), 766-775.

[25]Michael Humphrey, "Migration, security and insecurity", *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (2013), 178-195.

[26]Carolin Emcke, *Against hate*, John Wiley & Sons, 2019.

districts, facilitating easy access for migrant workers to commute.[27] The Muslim presence in Buk-gu, Daegu, initially did not evoke the stereotype of 'Dangerous Muslims.' According to Humphrey, the Muslim students in the area were seen as 'Good Muslims,' inconspicuous and not overtly expressing their religious beliefs.[28] Essentially, they were perceived more as unfamiliar individuals rather than adherents of a particular faith, rendering them virtually invisible within the broader Korean society. This area houses many international students, including many Muslim students specializing in science and engineering, owing to its proximity to Kyungpook National University and the College of Science and Technology. While exact statistics on Muslim students are unavailable, around 150 Muslim graduate students are estimated to attend Kyungpook National University.[29]

The locality is densely populated by Muslim international students and their families, who have integrated into the community, enrolling their children in local kindergartens and schools.[30] The Dar-ul-Emaan Kyungpook Islamic Center, established in 2012 by students of Kyungpook National University, began as a rented space near the university's west gate.[31] By 2014, the students expanded their worship space by renting a floor in a nearby building. Early efforts to construct a new mosque included fundraising and even manual labor to maintain the building site. Despite its modest beginnings, the space represented the community's aspiration to eventually establish a new mosque to serve the spiritual needs of all nearby Muslims.

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[27]Youngim Chi, "Migration and Religious Community - A case study on the conflict over the construction of the Daegu Islamic center", *Journal of Community Culture and Folklore*, Vol. 6 (2023), 53-84.

[28]Michael Humphrey, "Migration, security and insecurity"..., 178-195.

[29]Joowon Yuk and Sohoon Yi, "Racism in Disguise: Islamophobia and Daegu Daruleeman Islamic Mosque." *Asian Review*, Volume 12, Number 1 (2022): 33-65.

[30]Youngim Chi, "Migration and Religious Community..., 53-84.

[31]Joowon Yuk and Sohoon Yi, "Racism in Disguise..., 33-65.

In the summer of 2018, researcher Yi first met the students involved with the mosque project near Kyungpook National University. Migrant Muslims in Daegu and the Gyeongsangbuk-do region of South Korea fall into distinct social groups, primarily laborers, students, and marriage migrants. Laborers often form communities based on nationality and religious sects, while such divisions are less evident among students due to their smaller numbers. Despite these differences, students primarily communicating in English play a crucial role in building and maintaining a unified community within the multicultural religious facility.

In 2018, the musallah served as a vital sanctuary for Muslim students, accommodating their prayer needs within a demanding graduate school schedule despite its suboptimal conditions, as shown in Figures 2 and 3. Yi stumbled upon these students by chance after initially finding the rented musallah space vacated. Her subsequent inquiries at a small supermarket frequented by international students led the owner to introduce her to someone involved in the mosque's construction. This connection allowed Yi to engage with the students managing the mosque's operations. For them, the musallah was more than just a place of worship; it served as a community center and a spiritual retreat from the rigors of studying abroad, highlighting their deep need for a 'safe and comfortable space for prayer,' driven by their desire to foster a dedicated area for spiritual well-being.

> Case 1 A, aged 2*, male, student, Pakistan
>
> "Why do you all raise the funds by yourselves? Is there a reason you don't look for a sponsor?"
>
> "We are aware this place is old and shabby. It is also small for all students to gather. But in the past, it was uncomfortable since it wasn't our home (musallah), and now it's great having our own space. The students can come to pray more often than before."

At the time of their visit to the proposed mosque site, the students were already acquiring land and raising funds for construction. Yi observed that the site was surrounded by several buildings, posing challenges due to Korean architectural regulations. Initially, the students had limited knowledge of overcoming these obstacles. As the project progressed, it became clear that additional land was needed for ancillary facilities like an entranceway and parking, leading the Muslim community to acquire more parcels. The community's fundraising efforts, conducted without organizational backing, involved a nationwide campaign to gather the necessary funds. This approach later sparked controversy among residents, who accused the community of financial irregularities, such as accepting excessive and anonymous donations. Subsequent police investigations did not substantiate these accusations. In July 2018, Ph.D. students from Pakistan and Jordan, representing the Muslim community, addressed these allegations, explaining their fundraising strategies and the broader complexities they faced in developing the mosque under local scrutiny.

Case 2 A, aged 2*, male, student, Pakistan, 2018. 07.

We could get sponsored by Islamic institutes or cultural (Certain countries) institutions in Korea or send letters abroad to groups sponsoring mosque construction to get support. However, once external funds flow in, this mosque is no longer a space for Muslim students studying at Kyungpook National University but one where the identity is set and operated according to the people who pay for the funds.

Case 3 B, male, Ph.D. student, Jordan, 2018.07

We need a religious facility for us to worship and gather. Students from abroad will continue to come here, and although we don't know how long it will take, we will build our mosque by ourselves.

Since 2014, Muslim students have rented a modest mosque space. By 2017, as their congregation expanded, they initiated fundraising for a more permanent facility. By September 2020, they had purchased a detached house, registered as a 'place for religious congregation.' They received a building permit from the Buk-gu District Office on December 3, 2020, signifying the start of construction. Although Muslims had been using the area for religious activities since 2014, significant conflicts with residents only emerged in February 2021, following the completion of foundational work and concrete pouring, which marked the beginning of tensions affecting construction. In December 2020, researchers revisited the site, meeting with C, a naturalized Korean from Pakistan with a nearby business, and A, who have been in continuous contact since 2018. They reported that funding was secured and construction was progressing, despite delays in concrete setting due to cold weather, with completion expected by April 2021. The researchers were optimistic, unaware of the impending dispute over the mosque's construction.

The visible "bad Muslims"

The initiation of mosque construction in Daehyun-dong, Daegu, marked a turning point for the Muslim community, previously unnoticed, to being perceived negatively as 'Visible, Bad Muslims' and 'Dangerous Others.' In February 2021, residents filed a petition against the construction, expressing Islamophobic concerns, including noise, smell, and fears related to "collective ritual," as well as more severe accusations like "tyranny of Muslims" and "ruling base of foreigners (Muslims)." [32] These issues underscored deep-seated Islamophobia. With student representative B abroad due to visa issues, A and C addressed these tensions with the residents. During a detailed briefing with researchers about the ongoing

[32]Joowon Yuk and Sohoon Yi, "Racism in Disguise..., 33-65.

conflict and specific incidents at the construction site, C, who speaks fluent Korean, shared his experiences and reactions to the escalating tensions with his neighbors.

> "Do you know what the best part about Korea is? Korea is a country where we can live according to the law. We proceeded with the construction as dictated by Korean law, so we were not worried. The residents have also been good neighbors. We will be able to resolve this without any serious problems."

The mosque construction conflict in Daegu took a negative turn from the Muslim community's initial optimism. Despite C's hopeful approach, he began receiving threatening letters at his store, highlighting worsening community relations. Attempts to negotiate with the resident head, the local authority, during the early stages of the conflict were consistently blocked by the residents' strong opposition. The situation escalated, attracting national media attention, especially since the mosque was near Kyungpook National University.[33] Subsequently, the Buk-gu District Office approved the construction and issued a stop order, siding with the residents. This elevated the dispute from a local issue to a national concern, amplified by media coverage. In response, a human rights group aligned with the Muslim community, while the residents garnered support from both a Christian group and a right-wing conservative faction.[34] Reports emerged among the Muslims of rumors suggesting the residents had enlisted professional protesters to bolster their demonstrations.

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[33]Mian Muaz Razaq, "The Daegu Mosque Issue: A Reflection of Islamophobia and Challenges to Religious Freedom in South Korea", *Research of Human Right*, Vol.6, No. 1 (2023), 245-284.

[34]Kyung-yeol Baek, "Religious Figures Step Forward: 'Stop Hate and Discrimination Against the Daegu Islamic Mosque'", *KyungHyang Newspaper* (January 18, 2023) https://www.khan.co.kr/article/202301181817001; Su-jin Na. "Behind the Three Years of Stalled Construction Site of Daegu Islamic Mosque: The Far-Right Protestant Groups." *NewsNJoy* (December 20, 2023) https://www.newsnjoy.or.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=305966

Leveraging support from various organizations sympathetic to their cause, the Muslim community launched an administrative litigation to contest the construction suspension order, marking a new phase in their ongoing struggle for the mosque's establishment.

On Feb 16, 2021, the Daegu District Court mandated repealing the Buk-gu District Office's suspension order on the mosque's construction.[35] However, despite the judicial directive, residents obstructed the construction site with vehicles, halting any development. Subsequently, on September 13, 2021, these residents escalated their opposition by petitioning the Blue House, intensifying the conflict. The unfolding administrative litigation and the petition to the Blue House significantly exacerbated tensions, leading to heightened emotional responses from both parties and incidents where physical altercations were nearly instigated.[36] When asked about the mood and response of the Muslims, C answered:

> "Many of the Muslims who had been living around here with family have already left Korea. They had been living here not because they had nowhere else to go but because they liked Korea. But after this happened, as Muslim children were bullied at school by Korean classmates and banners were put up on the streets denouncing Muslims, students studying here and their families can no longer stand it."

In 2021, the area surrounding the mosque and the residences of Muslim students witnessed the emergence of banners and pickets bearing insults and discriminatory messages against Islam. [37] Some banners

[35]Mian Muaz Razaq, "The Daegu Mosque Issue..., 245-284.; National Human Rights Commission Affirmative Action Division, " Resume Work on Mosque and Take Action Against Hate Speech Targeting Muslims." *National Human Rights Commission*, 2021. https://www.humanrights.go.kr/base/board/read?boardManagementNo=24 &boardNo=7607287&page=&search Category=&searchType=&searchWord=&displayType=&year=&month=&menuLevel=3&menuNo=91

[36]Statement 2021a; 2021b;; see the specific case in homepage of Kukmin Chyoungwon.

[37]According to Yi Sohoon and Yuk Juwon, during this period, residents deployed banners and signs to incite hatred and vigilance, prominently featuring Islamophobic rhetoric that

explicitly denigrated Muslim residents by labeling them as Taliban followers, particularly distressing given their placement on routes leading to educational institutions attended by Muslim children. Echoing Judith Butler's analysis, such oppressive language transcends mere representation of violence to become an act of violence itself, fundamentally challenging the identity and existence of the targeted group.[38]

The deployment of hate speech and derogatory banners served not only to express contempt but also to negate the Muslim community's presence, prompting many Muslim students to contemplate leaving this environment of denigration. During a visit to the site, as researchers and Muslim students documented the offensive banners, they were mistaken for journalists by residents, who confronted them with hostile remarks questioning their understanding of Islam. Representative A, a long-standing liaison with the researchers, returned to Pakistan following the completion of his studies in Korea, driven by the stress of navigating the conflict on behalf of the Muslim community. His responsibilities were subsequently assumed by D, another Ph.D. candidate from Pakistan, indicating the ongoing challenges faced by the community in seeking resolution and acceptance. When asked how he comforted and reassured the Muslim community, he answered:

> *"We have a messenger group with all the community members. I leave a message there every morning, never to respond to the Koreans who attack Muslims. I tell them to think of good Koreans who help and support us and that we must believe those who make it hard for us will be persuaded and changed in time."*

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employed racist essentialization (e.g., "Muslims who kill people brutally and behead them get out of this area right now. Terrorists!!"), appeals to residential fear and anxiety (e.g., "If it becomes a Muslim-dense area and becomes a slum, will you be responsible?"), assertions of national priority and criticisms of reverse discrimination (e.g., "If we try to protect Islamic human rights, our people will become refugees."), portrayals of the indigenous population as victims, and emphasis on vulnerability (e.g., "The mayor of Daegu should revoke the building permit of a mosque that violates the survival and property rights of citizens!!").

[38]Echoing Judith Butler's (2022, 1997)

On October 1, 2021, the National Human Rights Commission of Korea declared its support for the Muslim community based on its investigative findings. It advised residents against hindering the mosque construction and to stop engaging in hate speech and threatening conduct towards Muslims.[39] Despite this guidance, opposition from the residents continued. The verdict of the initial legal battle challenging the halt on construction was delivered on December 16, 2021, in favor of the Muslim community, thereby green-lighting the continuation of construction. However, this decision was quickly appealed by the opposition. The Buk-gu District Office, acknowledging the difficulty of overturning the initial decision, refrained from appealing, while the residents, serving as secondary litigants, proceeded to a second trial. The second trial also concluded by April 22,

[39](The National Human Rights Commission of Korea, General Discriminations Team 2021)

This decision addresses a complaint regarding unfair construction suspension notices issued against the construction of the mosque, alleged discrimination, and human rights violations against Muslims by certain municipal authorities. The National Human Rights Commission of Korea adjudicated the case, deliberating on the complaints against the district office head and the metropolitan city mayor.

The complaints were multifaceted: the first alleged that the construction stoppage was discriminatorily based on anti-Muslim sentiments fueled by residents' complaints. Secondly, it was claimed that the continued allowance of hate speech banners against Islam, without any action to remove them, infringed upon the human dignity and basic rights of the mosque community members. The third complaint implicated the metropolitan city mayor for not rectifying the district office's unfair construction suspension order, thereby condoning the discriminatory act.

The Commission decided to dismiss certain aspects of the complaint due to ongoing legal actions in court concerning the construction stoppage. However, it expressed the opinion that resuming mosque construction was advisable, emphasizing the necessity for the local district office to undertake measures ensuring the continuation of construction activities. Additionally, it recommended action against the public display of hate speech and discriminatory banners against Muslims, highlighting the local government's duty to prevent such human rights infringements actively.

This case illustrates the Commission's role in addressing discrimination and ensuring the protection of human rights within the South Korean jurisdiction. It emphasizes the need for local governments to respect and uphold the rights of religious and ethnic minorities, actively work against discriminatory practices, and foster an environment of tolerance and respect for all communities.

2022, favoring the Muslim community.[40] Nonetheless, the residents filed an appeal to the Supreme Court within three days. On September 20, 2022, the Supreme Court ratified the lower court's decision, confirming the unlawfulness of suspending the construction due to public dissent.[41]

In December 2022, the level of opposition escalated, with residents adopting measures interpreted as acts of religious discrimination and hatred. This escalation involved positioning pig heads at the construction site, eventually totaling three, which local authorities deemed not actionable as offensive objects. This situation intensified in mid-December, with the display of pig feet and tails on walls and the organization of a pig roast event in the alley leading to the mosque, compelling Muslims to pass through it to reach the temporary prayer space. Such actions by the residents, widely condemned as manifestations of religious and racial discrimination, highlight the profound dispute over the construction of the mosque. Despite these provocations, the Muslim community has chosen to limit their responses to these antagonistic actions. In an interview conducted right before the barbecue party, a Muslim interviewee stated:

> "They turn on loud music on speakers when we are worshipping. They left pig heads along the entranceway we used and blocked the street so that we had to carry every sack of concrete and each brick by hand. But it's fine. Anyhow, we are continuing with the construction. Eventually, we will live here with the residents. We want to live along with them, not drive them out. Thus, we are fine, even if they keep eating roasted pork before us and placing pig heads here."

While the residents and the Muslim community carried on the legal conflict, various additional conflict situations occurred. They are classified

[40]Jeong-sik Gong, "Daegu High Court Rules the Suspension of Construction on Daegu Islamic Mosque Illegal...Victory for Islam Side." *News1* (April 22. 2021). https://www.fnnews.com/news/202204221056314529.

[41]Yonhapnews, " Daegu Mosque 'Construction Stop' Cancellation Lawsuit Wins Final Victory in Supreme Court", 2022a. https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20220920087100004.

into the following: 1) distribution of flyers and posting of banners using expressions of hate; 2) expression of hate and discrimination using social media such as YouTube videos and Instagram and Facebook posts; 3) disposal of trash and making false reports to media.

Beyond legal proceedings, a series of conflicts, both significant and minor, persisted on-site, directly involving the residents and the Muslim community. In some instances, residents entered a store operated by an individual significantly involved in the conflict, where they openly insulted or voiced their dissatisfaction with the storekeeper and threatened by placing posters demanding "Leave this place" on the store walls. Such acts of hate speech adversely affected not only Muslims but also other international students, as distinguishing between Muslims and non-Muslims by appearance is challenging—mainly when women do not wear hijabs, leading to widespread discrimination against the entire foreign population.[42]

The primary participants in the mosque construction dispute near Kyungpook National University in Daegu exhibit different traits. The residents, predominantly older individuals who earn their livelihood by renting properties to international students, lack exposure to and education about discrimination and hate, concepts increasingly discussed in contemporary Korean society.[43] Despite asserting neutrality towards Islam, their interviews often revealed discriminatory sentiments and hate speech. Given Korea's delicate social fabric concerning discrimination, a deeper examination is warranted into how expressions of prejudice and hate, especially from older community members, should be critiqued. In contrast, most of the Muslim community is comprised of graduate-level students with limited proficiency in Korean but a comprehensive

[42]Mian Muaz Razaq, "The Daegu Mosque Issue..., 245-284..

[43]Joohee Choo, "A Study to explore the conservatism of the region through the family situational discrimination perception.: Focusing on generation and gender differences by region", *Research Institute for Social Science*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (2021), 43-76.

understanding of problem-solving and legal preparedness. Faced with provocations from the residents, the Muslims advised each other to maintain restraint and avoid escalating the conflict. They consolidated their communication efforts through a representative proficient in English and known for a calm demeanor, aiming to present a unified message.

This strategy was informed by their perception of the incidents as manifestations of discrimination and hate, prompting a determined response to each incident. The conflict surrounding the mosque's construction has evolved from a localized dispute into a broader issue, drawing attention from various stakeholders. Although not a focal point for all Koreans, its significance warrants repeated media coverage and even feature articles, indicating the conflict's escalation beyond its initial scope.

Why do the local residents of Daegu oppose the construction of the Mosque?

Threat to public order and security

Beydoun contends that personal anxieties and fears, as explored in the preceding theoretical discussion, significantly shape public discourse, subsequently influencing policy formulation.[44] The Daegu case exemplifies how localized disputes over mosque construction can escalate from neighborhood quarrels to matters of concern at the ward, city, national, and international levels. These disputes are then construed as pressing security concerns at the local level. Residents opposing the mosque's construction near Kyungpook National University cite public order and security as primary concerns. While regional public order and national security are often conflated, they are distinct concepts that require differentiation.[45]

[44]Khaled A Beydoun, *American Islamophobia...*

[45]Kim Hyun, and Song Kyung-Ho, "How Did 'Security' Become 'Anbo'?: Focusing on Its Transmission Process as 'Anjeon', 'Anjeonbojang', and 'Anbo'", *Korean Journal of International*

In the context of this mosque construction conflict, however, the residents did not distinguish between the two, associating Muslims directly with terrorism and thus merging concerns of national security with local public order. Claims by the residents painted Muslims as agents of international terrorism, unwelcome in their residential area. This perception manifested in banners and promotional materials associated with petitions against the mosque's construction. Some individuals, including those not residing in the area but aligned with the opposition, resorted to writing inflammatory statements near the construction site, such as "Islam people are terrorists" and "Muslims slit throats and hang heads,"[46] and engaged in intimidating actions mimicking violent acts against Muslims.

Interviews with residents revealed profound antagonism towards Islam, fueled by fears that the influx of Muslims into the area would precipitate terrorism. Despite these fears, no evidence suggests an increase in crime rates or occurrences of terrorist attacks in the region since the establishment of a musallah by Muslims in 2014. Conversely, the area faced declining local population and slummification challenges, with international students emerging as a vital economic lifeline for residents. Nevertheless, opposition to the mosque construction was consistently articulated in terms of Islamic affiliation, framing "being Islam" or "being Muslim" as justifications for resistance. The media has broadly interpreted these resident reactions as instances of Islamophobia, identifying it as a critical driver of the conflict surrounding the mosque's construction.[47] This generalization underscores the complex interplay of social perceptions, media portrayals, and the tangible impacts of these dynamics on community relations and architectural developments.

Relations (KJIR), Vol. 60, No. 4 (2020), 41-77.

[46]Joowon Yuk and Sohoon Yi, "Racism in Disguise..., 33-65.

[47]Yonhapnews, " No Islamic Establishments in My Neighborhood... How to Resolve the Ongoing Conflict", 2022b. https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20220318134200371.

Group activities, nose, and smell

Residents expressed concerns that the mosque's construction would lead to continuous group activities by foreigners, causing disturbances such as noise and smell. Historical instances of mosque construction conflicts often cite Muslim-specific concerns like the Azan (call to prayer), the smell of food, and minarets disrupting the local landscape as points of contention.[48] The residents' apprehensions include 1) the expectation of Muslim men congregating in groups multiple times daily, exerting pressure on the local community; 2) potential disturbances due to noise from gatherings for prayer services in a predominantly residential area; and 3) the projection that cooking and sharing food within the Muslim community will produce exotic smells, causing discomfort to nearby residents.[49]

In response, the Muslim community proposed a negotiation agenda aimed at addressing these concerns: 1) acknowledging the five daily prayer services but noting that student participation primarily occurs during afternoon and evening services, with assurances that mosque opening times could be adjusted as per residents' requests; 2) agreeing to refrain from practicing Azan, commit to ongoing noise management in response to complaints, and proposing the construction of high walls to mitigate noise impact on neighboring properties; 3) planning to install a chimney at a significant height to ensure cooking smells do not affect nearby residents adversely.[50] Despite these proposed measures, the residents remained

[48]Richard Gale, "The multicultural city and the politics of religious architecture: Urban planning, mosques and meaning-making in Birmingham, UK", *Built Environment*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2004), 30-44.; Richard Gale, "Representing the city: Mosques and the planning process in Birmingham." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol.31, No. 6 (2005): 1161-1179.

[49]see also Razaq, Mian Muaz Razaq, "The Daegu Mosque Issue..., , 245-284.; Jeong-seok Kim, "'Worries of Noise and Odor if Worshippers Gather': The Hidden Reasons Behind the Daegu Mosque Construction Conflict", *JoongAng Ilbo* (2021) https://www.joongang.co.kr/article/24037425#home.; National Human Rights Commission Affirmative Action Division, 2021.

[50]National Human Rights Commission Affirmative Action Division, 2021.; Interviewed

skeptical, doubting the Muslim community's commitment to fulfilling these promises.

Economic factor

According to existing research, people perceive immigrants as a significant factor that can negatively impact the economy when they enter their society.[51] Especially in the absence of appropriate government intervention, most residents tend to feel that immigrants could threaten their societal and economic aspects.[52] As previously discussed, this phenomenon is also observed in Western societies with substantial immigrant influxes, where the working-class segment, anticipated to be directly economically impacted by immigration, exhibits strong resentment towards immigrants.[53] In the case of Daegu, the expected direct hit to the real estate economy has significantly heightened residents' sensitivity towards immigrants. Remarkably, the threat perceived by the majority grows proportionally as the size of the immigrant group increases.[54] To rationally comprehend why the immigrant Muslim community, existing in the region since 2014, only emerged as a focal point of conflict by 2021, it is crucial to recognize that people's perception of the threat changes with the change in the size of the group. Concurrently, as they become aware of the immigrants and their activities, there's a growing antagonism towards immigrants, fueled

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with authors.

[51]Boris Heizmann & Nora Huth, "Economic conditions and perceptions of immigrants as an economic threat in Europe: Temporal dynamics and mediating processes", *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, Vol. 62, No. 1 (2021), 56-82.

[52]Marco Marozzi, "Construction, robustness assessment and application of an index of perceived level of socio-economic threat from immigrants: A study of 47 European countries and regions", *Social Indicators Research*, Vol. 128 (2016), 413-437.

[53]Ian Patel, *We're Here Because You Were There...*

[54]Mikael Hjerm & Kikuko Nagayoshi, "The composition of the minority population as a threat: Can real economic and cultural threats explain xenophobia?", *International Sociology*, Vol. 26, No. 6 (2011), 815-843.

by the recognition that these activities threaten the economic interests of the mainstream group.

The land for mosque construction, purchased by Muslims, is situated in the heart of a residential area near the west gate of Kyungpook National University, surrounded by single and multiplex buildings. This location was selected despite being a "blind lot," lacking direct roadway access or parking, typically deemed undesirable for investment due to development constraints.[55] The Muslim community, unfamiliar with the concept of blind lots, proceeded with the purchase to meet their financial and spatial needs. However, subsequent construction permit applications were initially rejected due to the absence of required access and parking facilities. Negotiations between the Muslim community and local landowners near the blind lot, identified as H and I, unfolded against this backdrop. H suggested selling his land to the Muslims at a price above market value, which the community declined. Instead, they acquired a nearby lot with the necessary access, commencing construction. However, H later led protests against the mosque, marking the onset of the conflict, which transcended mere economic considerations to involve fears over property devaluation.[56]

This conflict's root was not Islamophobia but concerns over economic interests and property values, crucial in Korea's context, where real estate rights are highly valued.[57] The conflict was further compounded by the area being identified as a highly likely candidate for government-led redevelopment, amplifying the urgency to safeguard assets.[58] This situation introduced an implicit competition among stakeholders, aiming to enhance

[55]Seok-man Yoon, "The Cause of the Mosque Conflict Is Not 'Islamophobia' but the Lack of Administrative Power", JoongAng Ilbo (2023). https://www.joongang.co.kr/article/25177801#home.

[56]Interviewed with Muslim relevant in Daegu, June 2021

[57]Kyung-Hwan Kim, "Housing and the Korean economy", *Journal of Housing Economics*, Vol.13, No. 4 (2004), 321-341.

[58]Daegu, *Urban Residential Master Plan*, 2021.

their future wealth through the anticipated increases in property values associated with redevelopment initiatives.[59] The Buk-gu Office's passive response to the escalating tensions and explicit acts of hate against the Muslim community exacerbated the situation, reflecting a broader systemic bias and a lack of multicultural sensitivity. The reluctance of the Muslim community to relocate is driven by the need to maintain proximity to Kyungpook National University for student accessibility and the potential urban redevelopment value of the area, underscoring the economic dimensions of the dispute. As the conflict attracted wider attention and involvement from various groups, it morphed into a broader issue of discrimination, hate, and perceived religious conflict, overshadowing the initial economic motivations. However, attributing the conflict solely to Islamophobia or cultural differences oversimplifies the complex dynamics at play, ignoring the nuanced interactions between economic interests, community relations, and the multifaceted impacts of globalization and migration on local communities.

The conflict over the mosque construction in Daegu has become significantly obscured in its essence due to the lack of proper initial clarification of causes and the involvement of numerous individuals, organizations, and institutions. Nonetheless, analyzing this conflict solely as a case of Islamophobia or racial conflict oversimplifies and homogenizes the conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims as one stemming from religious bias or prejudice. This approach risks misrepresenting Korean society's diversity by confining it within a spiritual framework, ignoring various aspects of Korea's cultural diversity acceptance and creating potential misunderstandings through incorrect biases. It is an undeniable

[59]Tatsuya Tokiyoshi, "The Mosque Construction Conflict in Daegu, South Korea: Also a Tug of War over Redevelopment, According to an Islamic Scholar." Sankei Shimbun (March 14 2024). http://sankei.com/article/20240314-5NLUTIYSUZO5RMD54HNUZ7AGVE/

fact that acts of religious discrimination and racism based on Islamophobia have occurred during the progression of this incident. However, the issue at hand requires a sober assessment of whether the social exclusion of Muslims based on Islamophobia was the ultimate goal of the residents or if Islamophobia and religious conflict were instrumentalized to achieve the residents' hidden objectives and initial intentions, with such actions intensifying over time. In essence, the mosque construction conflict in Daegu represents a comprehensive occurrence of potential economic, social, cultural, religious, and political conflicts between immigrants and native residents; we need to remember that the involved parties extend beyond the primary stakeholders of Muslim students and residents to include various entities within Korean society.

Conclusion

This article posits that attributing the conflicts between migrant Muslims and locals in South Korean society solely to religious discrimination or Islamophobia would constitute a profound oversimplification. In the contemporary societal context, disputes involving Islam often resemble a black hole, eclipsing alternative explanations and converging singularly on Islam as the conflict's nucleus. However, global instances of conflict involving Islam seldom subscribe to such a unidimensional paradigm. They emerge from the coexistence of diverse identities, necessitating a multifaceted examination of conflict causes to identify appropriate resolutions. Only through an accurate comprehension of the conflict's recurrent nature and a commitment to its resolution can cohabitation in a heterogenous society be achieved.

As disputes with migrant Muslims gain visibility in Korean society, a pivotal question arises: Is Korean society prepared to embrace Muslim migrants and refugees? Perhaps the framing of this question is fundamentally

flawed. With the foreign population in Korea already exceeding 2.5 million, the imperative now is to transcend nebulous apprehensions and animosities towards Muslims and to pursue coexistence actively. Harboring hatred and antagonism towards the 'Other' is an anachronistic stance. The pertinent inquiry at this juncture concerns how Korean society will coexist with migrants of varied identities and how it can evolve from a strong nation-state orientation and monocultural identity to embrace diversity. For Daegu Metropolitan City to authentically embody its motto of 'Colorful Daegu' and for Korean society to foster diversity and social integration, a need exists for comprehensive, long-term policy measures and heightened sensitivity towards diverse forms of discrimination.

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