

For other uses, see Blue Mosque (disambiguation).

The Blue Mosque is an 18th-century Shia mosque in Yerevan, Armenia. It was commissioned by Huseyn Ali Khan, the khan of Erivan. It is one of the oldest extant structures in central Yerevan and the most significant structure from the city's Iranian period. It was the largest of the eight mosques of Yerevan in the 19th century and is today the only active mosque in Armenia.

The mosque was secularized in the 1920s and housed the History Museum of Yerevan for more than five decades. Following Armenia's independence, the mosque was renovated with the support from the Iranian government and again started operating as a mosque, serving the Iranians residing in Yerevan.

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Names[edit]

Western visitors in the Russian period, such as H. F. B. Lynch and Luigi Villari, referred to the mosque as Gök Jami (Gok Djami, Turkish: Gök Cami),^{[5][6][3][7]} which translates from Turkish as "sky blue mosque".^[8] It is known as Կապույտ մզկիթ, Kapuyt mzkıt' "Blue Mosque" in Armenian, although Գյոյ մզկիթ, Gyoy mzkıt' is sometimes used as well.^[1] It is known in Persian as Masjid-i Juma or Jami-i Shahr.^{[7][3]}

History[edit]

Muslims in Yerevan

Year

%

1830^[9]

64%

1897^[10]

43%

1926^[11]

7.8%

Early history[edit]

The mosque was built in 1765–1766 (AH 1179)^[a] by Hussein (Hoseyn) Ali Khan, the ruler of the Erivan Khanate under the Afsharid dynasty of Persia,^{[3][1]} as the city's main Friday mosque.^[8] The mosque underwent substantial redecoration with tiles around 1887-88 (AH

1305), under Russian administration.[7] The mosque underwent another reconstruction in 1907–1910.[12]

The mosque was the largest of the eight mosques operating in Yerevan when the Russians captured it in 1827.[8][5][8]

H. F. B. Lynch, who visited Erivan in 1890s, wrote: "There is nothing very remarkable in the architecture of the mosque; but the floral paintings which adorn the ceiling of a companion and smaller edifice on the north side of the court are of very high merit." [13] Luigi Villari, an Italian diplomat and historian, gave a detailed description of the mosque in his 1906 book titled *Fire and Sword in the Caucasus*. He wrote that the "great mosque called the Gok Djami [...] is a good deal more than a mosque; it is a long quadrangle containing several places of worship and a number of cells, schools, and offices of the Moslem religious administration. It is not very ancient [...] but it is handsome." [6] The *Encyclopædia Britannica* (1911) described the mosque as the "finest building in the city." [14] The minaret of the mosque, standing at 24 metres (79 ft) was the tallest structure in 19th century Yerevan. [15]

Soviet period[edit]

The mosque was secularized after Soviet rule was established in Armenia. The mosque's entrances and exits were modified significantly. The main gate, on the southern side, to the right of the minaret was blocked. The western gate was "incorporated into a residence complex and became hardly recognizable as an entrance." The entrance on the northern side became the only entrance. It is accessible and visible from Mashtots Avenue. [15]

Beginning with Alexander Tamanian's 1924 master plan for Yerevan, the mosque has been situated more than two meters below the street level, which requires visitors to descend a flight of steps. [16]

The mosque ceased to operate as a religious institution in the mid-1920s. Its courtyard became a "creative space for Armenian artists, writers, poets, and intelligentsia, facilitating the production of a new cultural and aesthetic order for socialist Armenia. The courtyard was protected by large elm and plane trees, and in this way provided the hot and dusty city with a shaded refuge." [15] The courtyard housed a teahouse, which became a hub for intellectual gatherings. Yeghishe Charents, Martiros Saryan, Aksel Bakunts were among its regular visitors. Foreign guests included Armenian-American writer William Saroyan, Russian Jewish poet Osip Mandelstam, Russian novelist Andrei Bely and others. Local artists used the "courtyard for exhibitions and as a laboratory for new socialist spirituality." [17] In the 1930s first the Anti-Religious Museum and subsequently the Museum of Antifascism were housed at the mosque. From 1936 until the collapse of the Soviet Union, the mosque housed the Museum of Natural Sciences, which included a planetarium inside the main prayer hall and the Yerevan History Museum. [16][18]

Independence period[edit]

In the late 1980s, during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the mosque did not sustain any damages because it was considered to be Persian, not Azerbaijani, and housed the city's history museum. [16]

In February 1991 a preliminary agreement was reached between the city's authorities and an Iranian delegation to restore the mosque. [19] The mosque underwent major renovation between 1994 and 1998. [1] The city's authorities officially transferred the right to use the

mosque to Iran on October 13, 1995.[20] The government of Iran allocated some 1 billion Iranian rials (over \$1 million) for restoration works.[21][22] The mosque was re-opened as a religious institution in 1996.[16] Brady Kiesling described the restoration as "structurally necessary but aesthetically ambiguous." [8]

Another reconstruction was done between 2009 and 2011.[12]

Today[edit]

The Blue Mosque is the only active mosque in Armenia,[23][24] which has a small Muslim population (between 812[25] and 1,000 or 0.03% of the total population).[26]

Since restoration, it has become a religious and cultural center for the Iranians residing in Armenia and Iranian tourists visiting Armenia.[23] In 2003 the journalist Thomas de Waal noted that the only regular worshippers at the mosque were "the dozen or so diplomats from the Iranian Embassy." [27] Less than a decade later, in 2009, ArmeniaNow wrote that of the up to 2,000 Iranians residing in Yerevan as many as 500 periodically attend the mosque on Thursdays.[28] The Iranian cultural center inside the mosque complex attracts young Armenians seeking to learn Persian.[29] The Persian library of over 8,000 items, named after the poet Hafez, was opened inside the complex in October 2014.[30]

On December 10, 2015 the government of Armenia leased the mosque complex to the embassy of Iran to Armenia for 99 years to use it as a cultural center.[31][32]

Architecture[edit]

The mosque is listed by the Armenian government as a monument of national significance.[1] It is "one of the oldest buildings in central Yerevan"[3] and the "only extant building of the Iranian period in Yerevan." [7] The historian of Islamic art Markus Ritter described it as the "main model for the early Qajar mosque architecture of the Iranian period." [15] The mosque complex covers an area of 7,000 square metres (75,000 sq ft).[4] The mosque itself is 97 by 66 metres (318 ft × 217 ft),[12] while the courtyard is 70 by 47 metres (230 ft × 154 ft).[7] The mosque contains the traditional Shia attributes, including a minaret, three mihrabs (prayer halls), holy inscriptions, etc.[33] The mosque includes 24 arched cells that face the pool in the middle of the courtyard, which is surrounded by a rose garden.[3] The minaret, standing at 24 metres (79 ft) tall,[4][3] has a 7-degree slope, but is considered to be architecturally safe.[12]

Efforts to list as a World Heritage Site[edit]

See also: List of World Heritage Sites in Armenia

In October 2007 Armenian Foreign Affairs Minister Vartan Oskanian stated during his speech at the 34th session of the UNESCO General Conference in Paris that the Blue Mosque and other sites are on the waiting list for inclusion in the UNESCO World Heritage List.[34]

In January 2013 Armenian Minister of Culture Hasmik Poghosyan stated that Armenia will take all possible steps for inclusion of the mosque in the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites.[35][36] She reaffirmed this position in a meeting with Iranian Culture Minister Mohammad Hosseini in April 2013. Hosseini stated that he hoped Armenian efforts would succeed.[37] Armenia's Foreign Affairs Minister Eduard Nalbandyan, in his speech at the 38th session of UNESCO General Conference in November 2015:[38]

...neighboring Iran has made great efforts to preserve and protect the Armenian cultural heritage. The Armenian Monastic Ensembles of Iran, the oldest of which dates back to the

7th century, were inscribed on the World Heritage List by the Iranian Government. On our part, Armenia reconstructed the Iranian 18th century Blue Mosque in Yerevan, and is going to inscribe it on the World Heritage List.

On October 15, 2015 Armenian Prime Minister Hovik Abrahamyan and First Vice President of Iran Eshaq Jahangiri attended an event dedicated to the 250th anniversary of the mosque.[39][40] Abrahamyan stated in his speech that both Armenia and Iran "are now making efforts to have it put on the UNESCO World Heritage list." [41]

Controversy[edit]

Some Armenian and Western sources refer to the mosque as Iranian/Persian.[b][42][43][24] The anthropologist and ethnographer Tsypylma Darieva notes that "in local media and in official discourses, the Blue Mosque has been strongly associated with the new expatriate political body symbolizing the recent Armenian–Iranian friendship. This dominant reading of the place defines the Blue Mosque exclusively as the ‘Persian Mosque’." [16]

De Waal argues in his 2003 book *Black Garden* that writing out Azerbaijanis of Armenia from history was made easier by a linguistic sleight of hand, as the name "Azeri" or "Azerbaijani" was not in common usage before the twentieth century, and these people were referred to as "Tartars", "Turks" or simply "Muslims". [44] De Waal adds that "Yet they were neither Persians nor Turks; they were Turkic-speaking Shiite subjects of the Safavid Dynasty of the Iranian Empire". [44] According to De Waal, when the Blue Mosque is referred to as Persian it "obscures the fact that most of the worshippers there, when it was built in the 1760s, would have been, in effect, Azerbaijanis". [44] Darieva notes that it served as a Friday mosque for "Yerevan’s Muslim (mostly Azeri-speaking) population, until the middle of the 1920s." [15]

In Azerbaijan, the mosque is usually referred to as a monument of Azerbaijani heritage of Yerevan. [45][46] One government official called it "the largest religious center of Azerbaijanis living in Yerevan." [47] A 2007 book titled *War against Azerbaijan: Targeting Cultural Heritage*, published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan and the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, objected to the restoration of the mosque in the 1990s and to its "presentation as a Persian mosque." [48] The independent Armenian scholar Rouben Galichian argues in his 2009 book *Invention of History*: [49]

It must be said that all mosques built [in Yerevan] between the 1635 and 1820s were erected by the Iranians and bearing in mind that the local Muslim population, as well as the Persians were both Shias, their mosques were identical. Hence, it is very difficult to understand how the Blue Mosque could be an “Azeri” mosque, since such a classification did not exist.

See also[edit]

Islam in Armenia

Persian Armenia

Abbas Mirza Mosque, Yerevan

Shah Abbas Mosque, Yerevan

Notes