

Religion and the Secular State in Kazakhstan

Svante E. Cornell
S. Frederick Starr
Julian Tucker

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*Central Asia- Caucasus Institute
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A Joint Transatlantic Research and Policy Center
American Foreign Policy Council, 509 C St NE, Washington D.C.
Institute for Security and Development Policy, V. Finnbodavägen 2, Stockholm-Nacka, Sweden
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Västra Finnbodavägen 2, SE-13130 Stockholm-Nacka

E-mail: info@silkroadstudies.org

Editorial correspondence should be addressed to the European offices of the Joint Center (preferably by e-mail.)

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Preface

This *Silk Road Paper* is part of the ongoing research effort on secular governance, religion and politics at the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center. We issue this paper as a contribution to the meager research that exists on secular governance in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

While there is considerable opinion expressed by Western governments and NGOs on policies toward religion in Central Asia and the Caucasus, there is little analysis of what those policies actually are, what their intellectual antecedents may be, and what they intend to achieve. Indeed, until the publication in 2016 in this series of *Azerbaijan's Formula: Secular Governance and Civic Nationhood*, there had been no case study of what secular governance actually means in this regional context – let alone a comparative study of the similarities and differences among the six Muslim-majority states of the region, who constitute nearly half of the secular states of the Muslim world. The study of Kazakhstan is particularly timely given that country's increased international profile, including its closer cooperation with European institutions and its role as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council for 2017-18.

As this study will show, the model of secular governance of Kazakhstan, and more broadly of Central Asia and Azerbaijan, remains a work in progress. Yet in a situation where the increasing intermixing of religion and politics has had disastrous consequences in much of the Muslim world, these countries offer a radically different model that not only deserves further study, but that may prove relevant for other Muslim-majority states to examine.

This study follows the publication in this series of *Azerbaijan's Formula: Secular Governance and Civic Nationhood*, released in November 2016. It will be followed, later in 2018, by a study of secular governance in Uzbekistan. Building on these and other case studies, the Joint Center aims eventually to produce a comparative study of secular governance in the region as a whole. The authors of this study would like to express their gratitude to Braunny Ramirez and Jack Verser for their valuable research assistance to this project.

Svante E. Cornell

Director, CACI & SRSP Joint Center

Executive Summary

At independence, Kazakhstan shared with the successor states to the Soviet Union the challenge of replacing Soviet atheism with new state approaches to religion. Like the rest of Central Asia and Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan adopted a secular form of government. This makes the region stand out in the Muslim world, and is a source of pride for regional governments. Secular government should be a point of agreement between the region's states and Europe and the United States. But instead, it has become a source of controversy, as Western states and organizations frequently criticize state policies in the religious sphere.

The term "secularism" is a broad brush, which includes a wide variety of approaches, including the American, French and Turkish models. When Americans speak of secularism, however, they almost exclusively take the U.S. model as a reference point. This study instead uses a continuum defining five distinct models of interaction between the state and religion. On one end is "Fusion", a merger of political and spiritual realms. The next step is "Dominant Religion", in which religious minorities are tolerated, but the state endorses one particular religion. In the middle of the continuum is the "State Neutrality" model exemplified by the United States; it is followed by what we call the "Skeptical/Insulating" model, as in France, which seeks to regulate and control religious influence on the state and society. Finally, the last model is the "Hostile" model, to which Soviet atheism can be counted.

Kazakhstan shares many commonalities with its neighbors, but also important distinctions. It is considerably more diverse in ethnic and confessional terms. Also, Kazakhstan's Muslims were largely nomadic, and

historically embraced a form of Islam with stronger mystical and syncretistic aspects. Until independence, Kazakhs never had their own Islamic authorities: the *Ulama* was either in Kazan or in Tashkent.

Soviet rule had immense implications on religious life. But Soviet rule was not just the attempted destruction of religion: Soviet leaders also purposefully encouraged alien Salafi-inclined religious ideas as competition to traditional religious beliefs. When Kazakhstan experienced a revival of interest in religion at independence, the population could not just return to pre-Communist traditions. Instead, Kazakhstan's Muslim and Christians were both exposed to an onslaught of novel, foreign religious influences competing for influence – something government officials viewed with increasing concern.

A myriad of Islamic movements from Turkey, the North Caucasus, the Persian Gulf and South Asia competed for influence. Christian missionaries from Europe, North America and South Korea joined the fray, and targeted both the Russian Orthodox community and urbanized ethnic Kazakhs for conversion. While some groups were benign, there were also Salafi-Jihadi groups seeking to establish themselves in the country. Yet unlike its neighbors, Kazakhstan did not experience a serious challenge from religious extremism at independence – but since 2005, extremist violence has been on the rise. Kazakhstan's extremism problem is connected to influences from the North Caucasus, the Afghanistan-Pakistan area, and the Syria-Iraq war zone.

Twenty-five years after independence, survey research shows that religion has returned to a prominent place in society. But in international comparison, it is clear that Kazakhstan's believers stand out by opposing political manifestations of religion. Kazakhstan's Muslims show exceptionally low support for Sharia law, at 10 percent; even among those supporting Sharia, only four percent support the death penalty for apostasy,

and only a third support corporal punishment. Half of Kazakhs believe different religions lead to heaven, and that a person can be moral without believing in God. These numbers are off the charts in comparison with the rest of the Muslim world, and are indicative of a society deeply steeped in coexistence between religious communities.

Kazakhstan's model of secular governance did not adopt an American-style policy of neutrality toward religious communities. Instead, the government took upon itself to regulate religion, thus gravitating toward the Skeptical/Insulating model and drawing on the French and Turkish experience. Going one step further, however, the Kazakhstani model differentiates between traditional and non-traditional religious communities. Government policies explicitly endorse and promote the traditional communities, and seeks to allow them to restore their position in society, while being hostile to the spread of non-traditional religious influences. That means Kazakhstan also borrows elements of the "Dominant Religion" model, though with a twist: it does not privilege one particular religion, as most examples of this model do, but traditional religions at the expense of the foreign and novel interpretations.

Over time, Kazakhstan has adopted increasing restrictions in the religious field, and new measures were passed following terrorist incidents in 2011 and 2016. A 2011 law prohibited foreigners from registering religious organizations, required the registration of places of worship, and prohibited the holding of religious services in private homes – a practice common to more secretive religious groups. The law also forced religious communities to re-register with the state, and required a minimum number of adult members for registration at the local, provincial, and national. As a result, some smaller or less established groups failed to register. The law also restricted the dissemination of religious literature, requiring approval by the Agency for Religious Affairs.

Following terrorist incidents in 2016, the government created a Ministry for Religious Affairs to protect secularism and moderate religious traditions. In particular, it was created to focus on the development of the country's youth. Also in 2016, a compulsory course in "Secularism and Foundations of Religious Studies" became mandatory for ninth grade students. In 2018, further amendments to the law restricted minors' ability to attend religious services, and tightened restrictions on foreign religious education.

Kazakhstan's chief religious institution is the Muftiate, which works to coordinate religious practice with the state and is charged with training Islamic clergy. While the clerical establishment rests firmly on Hanafi Sunni Islam, Kazakhstan developed cooperation with Egypt to train its clergy, and created the Nur-Mubarak university for this purpose. Meanwhile, the country's most recent two muftis were both trained at Cairo's Al-Azhar Islamic university.

This raises questions regarding the possible influence of the stricter Islamic interpretations that dominate at al-Azhar. In addition, its influence contributes to hostility to Sufi practices, which provides a dilemma for Kazakhstan's government – which characterizes both Hanafi Islam and the Sufi-influenced "Folk Islam" as traditional, but does not appear to account for the possibility of a conflict between them. This matter will be one to watch over coming years, and may require attention by the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

Meanwhile, Kazakhstan's National Security Committee has taken the lead in fighting extremism. In particular, it monitors, infiltrates and prosecutes alleged extremists with considerable zeal. According to its own accounts, the organization has successfully intervened to prevent over 60 terrorist attacks in the country in the past five years. More controversially, it has also infiltrated and prosecuted groups engaged in nonviolent religious practices. These are typically prosecuted under a provision in Kazakhstan's criminal

code that prohibits propagandizing the superiority of one religion over another.

Events in the past decade led Kazakhstani authorities to conclude that they had underestimated the threat posed by extremist religious groups. Revisions to laws and policies have led to state intervention against individuals and communities that authorities deem extremist or non-traditional. This is one reason for the Western criticism directed against Kazakhstan.

However, another reason behind this criticism is a more philosophical disagreement: Western advocates support full religious freedom and state neutrality toward religion, accepting only intervention against groups engaging in or inciting violence. But Kazakhstan's authorities operate on the basis of a fundamentally different principle: that it is the duty of the state to regulate religious affairs to ensure the revival of traditional religious communities, and to ensure stability and harmony in society.

Kazakhstan's model is by no means perfect. If it was, the country's leaders would not feel the need to make so many adjustments to it. There is justified criticism that the state's policies have erred on the side of excessive restrictions. Meanwhile, Western criticism of Kazakhstan's policies also misses the mark, because it rejects the very premise of Kazakhstan's policies – the Skeptical/Insulating model of a secular state. Because of this, much of Western criticism falls on deaf ears in Kazakhstan, and has little influence in the country. A more fruitful approach would be to accept the premises of the Kazakh model, and rather than take an antagonistic approach, work with Kazakh authorities to improve the country's policies in the religious field. This could, over time, help Kazakhstan develop a model of relevance to Muslim-majority societies elsewhere.

Models of Secularism

When the Soviet Union broke up in 1991, leaders of newly independent countries such as Kazakhstan faced numerous challenges in the creation of new states. This included models of political and economic governance. But it also included more fundamental issues of the form of nationhood these states embraced, as well as the relationship between religion and the state. Everywhere, Soviet-era atheism was discarded. But remarkably, leaders in all six Muslim-majority states – Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – opted for maintaining the secular character of the state. In fact, these Muslim-majority states were less acceptant of religious influence on state institutions than Christian-majority states such as Armenia and Georgia. But having established that the state should be secular did not amount to a stroke of magic: the term secularism itself is open to interpretation. When using this term, this study refers to the secularism of the state and its institutions; not on the level worldliness as opposed to religiosity in society. But even then, secularism can be interpreted to mean widely divergent state approaches to religion.

While secular governance has become established in the Western world, misunderstandings often arise as a result from widely diverging definitions of secularism. It is useful, therefore, to consider conceptually the forms that a state's relationship with religion can take. While there are innumerable variants, these all operate along a continuum where on one end, state and religion are merged; and on another end, where the state actively suppresses all forms of religion. Along this continuum, five ideal-type models can be distinguished. These can be termed "Fusion," "Dominant Religion," "State

Neutrality,” “Skeptical/Insulating,” and “Hostile.” Importantly, while discussions of secularism usually refer to Western ideal-types like the French and American models, most if not all of these models have progenitors in the east as well as in the west.

The “**Fusion**” model presupposes that the political and spiritual realms are merged – often in the person of a leader holding ultimate worldly as well as religious power. In this system, the state seeks to impose one particular religion on the population. Other religions tend to be prohibited, actively discouraged, and repressed, their adherents expelled or forced to convert. Needless to say, the state religion permeates law and education, both of which are explicitly based on religious principles. This system can either subordinate political power under religious institutions, or the inverse.

Historical and contemporary examples of the fusion model are many. The Byzantine empire was ruled by a system later termed *caesoropapism*, which features a state-controlled church where religious matters became part of state administration. In Europe, counter-reformation Spain is another prominent case, but most of pre-Westphalia Europe exhibited elements of this model. The Peace of Augsburg of 1555 regulated religion by introducing the principle of *Cuius regio, eius religio*, which stipulated that the ruler of a territory had the right to determine the religion practiced in his realm. Thus, it did not provide religious freedom; it merely allowed “heretics” to emigrate to territories where their religion was official. For example, it was illegal for Swedish citizens to be Catholic until 1873.

In the Western hemisphere, the Inca empire fused religious and political power in the person of the emperor, who was the incarnation of the Sun God. Further east, the Seljuk and Ghaznavid empires similarly enforced their understanding of Sunni Islam. Today, states enforcing the Fusion model are rare: aside from the Vatican, which does not really have a lay population, Saudi Arabia is the closest example that comes to mind, since

the state officially tolerates only one religion, all others being banned. Even there, the initiatives of Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, if successful, would gradually transition away from this model. Post-1979 Iran also in part approximates the fusion model, given the introduction of the novel doctrine of *velayat-e-faqih*. Yet Iran tolerates certain religious minorities, such as Christian Armenians, while ferociously repressing others, such as the Baha'í.

The “**Dominant Religion**” model is similar to the Fusion model in that it elevates one religious doctrine as the state religion. But it differs in that it tolerates, and sometimes provides a level of autonomy, for minority religious groups. In other words, while it does privilege one religious doctrine, it provides some level of individual religious freedom, which the Fusion model does not. Nineteenth-century European monarchies are good examples of the Dominant Religion model; while they have moved slowly toward state neutrality, vestiges of state religion remain to this day. Thus, the Church of England remains the established Church, headed by the British Monarch; most Scandinavian countries have yet to fully separate the state from the Lutheran Church.

Outside Europe, the Ottoman Empire's *Millet* system also fits in this model. Whereas the empire was based on Sunni Islam and the Sultan was also the Caliph, merging worldly and spiritual power, the Ottoman empire provided relatively wide-ranging autonomy to its non-Muslim subjects. They were allowed to settle disputes internal to the religious community autonomously; but of course, any dispute between a Muslim or non-Muslim would be settled according to Sharia law. It should be noted that much as in present-day Iran, groups considered heretical were not accorded the privileges of the *millet* system. The Alevi community, for example, was subordinated to Sunni doctrine. Yet importantly, even the *millet system* hardly amounted to *individual* religious freedom, as individuals remained hostage to their particular religious communities and leaders.

Moghul India also adopted the Dominant Religion model. Here, the added twist was that the Dominant Religion was actually in the minority, in a subcontinent that remained majority Hindu. Finally, Meiji Japan can be added to the list, as the state integrated Shintoism into the state bureaucracy, while continuing to permit the exercise of religious freedom.

The Third model, occupying the middle point of the continuum, is the “**State Neutrality**” model, which to most western observers today is synonymous with “secularism.” The most notable example emerged with the American Constitution. This model arose from the sectarian conflicts between religious denominations in England and the American colonies. The main aim of this model is to secure religious freedom of the individual; it follows from this that the state must observe *neutrality* between different religious dogmas. Thus, it seeks to separate the state from religion; in other words, to relegate religion to the private sphere. In no sense does this make the state anti-religious; quite to the contrary, it emerged from the very aim of protecting the freedom of all different communities to worship without state interference. Today, most European states – Germany in particular – have gravitated toward this model, including the monarchies that may retain, for mostly ceremonial purposes, formal links to what once was a privileged state church.

But this model is not exclusively western. Most notably, the Mongol Empire fiercely enforced freedom of religion hundreds of years before Westphalia, and allowed the coexistence of Christians, Muslims and Buddhists – among other – in the lands it controlled. The state privileged no religious doctrine.¹ Today, a number of Asian democracies, such as Singapore and Japan, have similarly adopted neutrality in religious matters.

¹ Jack Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Quest for God: How the World's Greatest Conqueror Gave Us Religious Freedom*, New York: Viking, 2016.

The fourth category is the “**Skeptical/Insulating**” model. Pioneered by post-revolutionary France, this model goes further than the neutrality model in seeking to insulate the state – and often society – from religious influences – taking a skeptical approach toward religion. This model is known by its French term, *laïcité*, which is seldom translated into English and therefore frequently confused with American-style “secularism.” Yet it has a different background and different aims. It does not stem solely from an attempt to regulate conflict between religious denominations and ensure the freedom of the individual. While its roots lie in the 1598 Edict of Nantes, which sought to bring an end to the wars of religion of the second half of the sixteenth century, it has since that time focused more on disagreements in a predominantly Catholic society over the role of religion in the state. In other words, *laïcité* was devised to shield the state – and by extension the individual – from institutional religion. It sought not to protect a right *to* religious freedom, but a right *from* religious oppression.

Thus, its goals differ considerably from the State Neutrality model. The latter does not, in principle, see religion *per se* as a challenge to the state or to the freedom of society. Quite to the contrary, it tends to view state efforts to control expressions of religion as more problematic than those expression of religion might be. Therefore, the State Neutrality model tends to be quite acceptant of both individual and collective displays of religious identity. By contrast, the Skeptical/Insulating model very much views institutionalized religion as a threat to the freedom of the society and the individual, and to the integrity and autonomy of the state. As a result, it provides for state intervention in the area of religion, in order to regulate both the organization of religious communities and displays of religiosity in the public realm. In particular, it actively discourages any mixing of religion and politics. Where the State Neutrality model is comfortable with a society where public displays of religiosity are ubiquitous, the Skeptical/Insulating model

idealizes a society where religion is strictly personal, exercised in private, and minimized in the public realm.

Outside France, this model is prominent among former French colonies, but has also been adopted in other countries. South Korea, for example, adopted elements of the model in the post-second world war modernization process in order to regulate religion. While it enhanced provisions guaranteeing religious freedom in the 1980s, the state continues to involve itself in religious affairs to “encourage harmony among different religions so that they may wield a sound influence on society.”²

A prominent example of the Skeptical/Insulating model is post-1923 Turkey, which adopted the doctrine of *laiklik*, derived from the French concept, to manage and control the role of the dominant religion in society, Sunni Islam, and minimize its influence over politics.³ But particularly after 1950, Turkey gradually combined its skepticism of organized religion and efforts to insulate the state with an effort to promote a dominant religion. Thus, the state’s Directorate of Religious Affairs exclusively busies itself with Sunni Islam, and in practice promotes the Hanafi-Maturidi understanding of that religion. Yet while that is indeed the doctrine that a majority of the population professes, large minorities do not – such as millions of Shafi’i Kurds, heterodox Alevi, and Azerbaijani Shi’as. From the 1980 military coup onward, Turkish schools taught compulsory classes on religion, which exclusively covered Sunni Islam. Since the Justice and Development party came to power in 2002, Turkey has rapidly drifted away from the Skeptical/Insulating model to the Dominant Religion model.⁴

² Matthias König, “Religion and the Nation-State in South Korea: A Case of Changing Interpretations of Modernity in a Global Context,” *Social Compass*, vol. 47 no. 4, 2000, 560-61.

³ Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey*, Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1964.

⁴ Eric S. Edelman, Svante E. Cornell, Aaron Lobel, Halil Karavel, Blaise Misztal, *Turkey Transformed: The Origins and Evolution of Authoritarianism and Islamization under the AKP*, Washington: Bipartisan Policy Center, 2015. (<http://bipartisanpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/BPC-Turkey-Transformed.pdf>)

The fifth and final category is the “**Hostile**” model. Forming the other end of the continuum, it actively and often forcefully discourages both private and public manifestations of religion. This model is associated with states controlled by atheist ideologies, most prominently, socialist and communist states of the twentieth century. While the Skeptical/Insulating model has a healthy dose of skepticism for organized religion, it is not in and of itself anti-religious. Neither France nor Turkey razed churches or sought to restrict the exercise of religious rites. Skeptical/Insulating states share with socialism the fear of a threat to the state from organized religion; but socialist atheist societies view religion *in itself* as incongruent with modernity and progress, as an archaic belief system incompatible with their own that must be rolled back. Communist states are the primary examples of the “Hostile” model, but others, such as Nazi Germany, can be added to the list – with many historians believing the Nazi ambition, had they won the war, was the eradication of Christianity.⁵

In fact, the Communist ideology, itself having religious connotations, saw religion as a direct threat to its intellectual hegemony. In so doing, one must ask whether the end of the continuum does not bring it back to its beginning, making it a circle: if Communism is understood as a religion rather than just a political ideology, the state was hardly atheist at all, but sought to replace pre-existing religions and enforce the sole authority of Communism. Such an understanding would bring us back to the Fusion model, with the Communist Party merging worldly power and spiritual authority derived from Marxism-Leninism.

The five categories discussed above are ideal-types. As such, in the real world, few states will fall squarely and neatly into a single category. Indeed, many states will manifest characteristics of more than one model. While

⁵ George L. Mosse, *Nazi Culture: Intellectual, Cultural and Social Life in the Third Reich*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003, 235-262.

some writings of history might assume that the world is inexorably moving in the direction of State Neutrality toward religion along with the development of liberal democracy, in reality there is active contention today between the Dominant Religion, State Neutrality, and Skeptical/Insulating models. The first and last models are increasingly rare, but around the globe states are moving along the continuum among these three models, often borrowing elements of several.

Ignoring this complexity, western observers often use the term “secularism” interchangeably for government policies that differ in fundamental ways. In particular, when Western governments and organizations assess the practices of other states and design foreign policies in this field, the distinction between these models tend to be glossed over. Thus, American government agencies and many organizations promoting freedom of religion tend to assume that the only legitimate exercise of secularism is the State Neutrality model focused on ensuring religious freedom. But because of historical links and their own proper experiences, many non-Western countries have in fact adopted religious policies that have much more in common with the Skeptical/Insulating model, while occasionally maintaining aspects of the Dominant Religion model.

This is particularly the case in the Muslim world. The conditions that gave rise to secular ideas among political leaders shared more in common with the French than with the American experience. The urge to regulate relations between different Islamic communities certainly exists, particularly in societies like Azerbaijan that are split between Sunni and Shi’a communities. But this is dwarfed by the objective, much as in Catholic France, to protect the state from religious forces perceived to be large, monolithic and distinctively political in nature. Thus, the driving force behind secular governance has been the perceived need to prevent religious dogma from influencing the state and society. It should, therefore, come as no surprise that “secular” states in the Muslim world have drawn from the

French, and subsequently Turkish, experience of regulating religion. Since these states have democratic traditions that are less advanced than France, their policies have often been more restrictive than the French, and even repressive in nature. Similarly, leaders of majority-Muslim post-Soviet societies – the five states of Central Asia and Azerbaijan – shed the atheist Soviet model upon independence, but rapidly gravitated toward a model inspired by the French and Turkish examples – one that ensured the sensitive state-building project they embarked upon would not be hijacked by a politicization of the religious revival that began to sweep their societies.

Numerous states in the Muslim world have in the past century sought to develop more or less civic identities and uphold secular forms of government. While their experiences are unique, they are also instructive. Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan struggled with these notions for much of the twentieth century. All of these states are highly multi-ethnic, making the prospect of ethnic nationalism a divisive prospect. As a result, all sought to build inclusive concepts of the nation, based on the broader idea of citizenship. But they developed diverging approaches. Turkey and Iran, being post-imperial states, let there be no doubt that the language and culture of the majority population would remain dominant, while non-Turks and non-Persians were welcome to assimilate into it. Post-Colonial Pakistan took a more civic route in elevating Urdu rather than the majority Punjabi language to the national language. In spite of the travails of Turkey and Iran, it is clear that their model, based on a dominant culture and language, has been more successful in forging national loyalty than has been the case in Pakistan.

In the religious realm, all secularizing states in the Muslim world have had to confront the powerful rise of political and radical manifestations of Islam since the 1960s. Pakistan and Iran first succumbed to the challenge in the late 1970s, as Zia ul-Haq and Ruhollah Khomeini imposed Islamic law with varying degrees of fervor. Almost simultaneously, Turkey's military regime

in the early 1980s began to introduce the notion of the Turkish-Islamic synthesis to counter perceived threats from the left. Within two decades, political Islam had grown to become the dominant ideology in Turkish politics.

Against this background, secular governance in the Islamic world is gradually declining; at present, aside from a number of states in Western Africa, it is represented mainly by the post-Soviet states of Central Asia and Azerbaijan. This brings us to the experience of Kazakhstan, and the historical background that has informed its model of secular governance.

The Development of Religion and Statehood in Kazakhstan

The relationship of state and religion in Kazakhstan is developing against the backdrop of a long and checkered past, with religious life being affected by indigenous as well as external forces, not least Russian imperial and subsequently Soviet power. This section provides a historical overview beginning with the Islamization of present-day Kazakhstan, through the colonial and Soviet periods.

Islamization

The Kazakhs originate from a pastoral nomadic people of Turkic heritage. The notion of a distinct Kazakh ethnic group dates to the establishment of a Kazakh Khanate in the mid-fifteenth century, when two tribal chiefs, Kerey and Janibek – sons of Barak Khan, of the White Horde of the Mongol Empire, departed from the Shaybanid Khanate of Abulkhayr, which was to form the origin of the Uzbeks. The two chieftains established a Khanate – in effect, a “confederation of nomadic tribes”⁶ that appear to have been primarily Turkic-speaking.⁷ They built their state in the southeast of present-day Kazakhstan, and their holdings expanded all the way to the Caspian sea and

⁶ Saulesh Esenova, “Soviet Nationality, Identity, and Ethnicity in Central Asia: Historic Narratives and Kazakh Ethnic Identity”, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 22 no. 1, 2002, 14.

⁷ Martha Olcott, *The Kazakhs*, Hoover Institution Press, 1987, p. 2 of chap 1.

to the borders of Siberia and China within a half century. Residents of this area, conforming largely to present-day Kazakhstan, were known as “Kazakhs” by the mid-sixteenth century. The Kazakhs came to be divided into three tribal sub-confederations known as the Uly Zhuz, Orta Zhuz and Kishi Zhuz – the Greater, Middle and Lesser Hordes.

This distinction has survived to the present day, but so has a strong sense of unity based on the myth of a single legendary common progenitor, named Alash. In spite of near-constant warfare across the steppe, the Khanate survived until the early eighteenth century, when it definitively split into three separate Khanates.

Soon thereafter began Russian colonization of Central Asia. Cossack fortified settlements had begun to appear in northern Kazakh lands in the seventeenth century, but as the Kazakh hordes were weakened by warfare with Oirats and Jungars, Russia managed to assert control over the territory of the Lesser Horde in the mid-eighteenth century. By century’s end, they had conquered the Middle Horde, and the Greater Horde was subjugated by the 1820s. While Kazakhs at times saw Russia as a lesser evil compared to other enemies, this process was riddled with frequent Kazakh uprisings against Russian control. Unlike in the rest of Central Asia, Russian colonization was accompanied by massive demographic shifts in present-day Kazakhstan – as a result both of large-scale Slavic migration into Kazakh lands, but also as a result of the killing and forced migration of numerous indigenous Kazakhs.

The Islamization of the Kazakhs is very much a controversial topic, as the Soviet historiography that dominated perception of religion in Kazakhstan is increasingly being challenged. The standard historical interpretation is that Central Asian nomads, particularly Kazakhs, were not truly Islamized until the nineteenth century. Until then, they had “worn their Islam lightly” and retained Tengriist and Shamanistic practices “under a thin coating of

Islam.” Subsequently, Tatar missionaries worked to “convert” them to more Orthodox Islamic practices in the nineteenth century.⁸ However, this interpretation has been accused of relying excessively on Soviet historiography.⁹ It is true that the Kazakhs had been Islamized before breaking away from the Uzbeks in the fifteenth century. As Alexander Morrison points out, therefore, “they have actually been Muslims for longer than they have been Qazaqs.” This dispute is occasionally more semiotic than anything else: as Kemal Karpat argues, the fact that Central Asian Islam incorporated indigenous traditions did not make it less Islamic, as Islam has done so all over the world.¹⁰ And as Frederick Starr has shown in *Lost Enlightenment*, Central Asia was far from a periphery of the Muslim world: it was a central area of Islam in the ninth to eleventh centuries, the place where much of Islamic orthodoxy was codified.¹¹ While this took place mainly in southern Central Asia, on the present territories of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, southern Kazakhstan was very much part of this phenomenon.

What did Islam mean to different parts of Kazakh society? It likely meant something entirely different to the nomadic Kazakhs than it did in the sedentary oasis cultures of the Uzbeks, Uyghurs and Tajiks of southern Central Asia. The latter societies developed formal Islamic institutions, to include mosques, madrasas and a clerical establishment or Ulama. Meanwhile, Islamic mysticism was strong all over Central Asia – several of

⁸ Alexander Morrison, “Teaching the Islamic History of the Qazaqs in Kazakhstan”, 2014. Also published in Yu. V. Shapoval, A. S. Kabylova & N. Robinson (ed.) *Islamovedenie v Kazakhstane: sostoyaniye, problemy, perspektivy*, Astana: ENU, 2014, pp.24-30.

⁹ Devin DeWeese, “Islam and the Legacy of Sovietology: A Review Essay of Yaacov Ro’i’s Islam in the Soviet Union,” *Journal of Islamic Studies*, vol. 13 no. 3, 2002, pp.298-330.

¹⁰ Kemal Karpat, “The Roots of Kazakh Nationalism: Ethnicity, Islam, or Land?”, in Marco Buttino, ed., *In a Collapsing Empire: Underdevelopment, Ethnic Conflicts and Nationalisms in the Soviet Union*, Annali della Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, 1993, p. 314.

¹¹ S. Frederick Starr, *Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia’s Golden Age from the Arab Invasions to Tamerlane*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013.

the most important Sufi orders indeed originate in Central Asia, including the largest of them, the Naqshbandi. Kazakhstan was home to Khoja Ahmet Yasawi, a Naqshbandi who gave birth to a separate Sufi brotherhood, and who devoted his life to the spread of Islam in Central Asia.¹² While this mystical tradition and more orthodox, formal Islam coexisted in the oasis cultures, there were practically no mosques, madrasas or Ulama in the lands inhabited by the nomads. As a result, scriptural Islam did not penetrate the nomadic societies until the times of Russian colonization and the gradual sedentarization of the Kazakhs. Among the nomads, Shamanist and ancient Turkic Tengrian religious traditions continued to be widely observed, and slowly merged with the mystical Islam of Sufism. Indeed, the worship of shrines inherent in Central Asian Sufism very much rhymes with the ancestor veneration of Tengriism.¹³ Especially away from urban areas, people “followed both Islam and Tengrianism, sometimes interchangeably.”¹⁴ To the extent that Islam was internalized, it was for all practical purposes the mystical Sufi Islam of the brotherhoods, not dogmatic orthodox Islam.

A caveat should be noted, relating to a class dichotomy in Kazakh society: it was divided into a narrow aristocracy known as *aq süiek* or “white bone” and a large commoner class known as *qara süiek* or “black bone”. The former included the *töre*, elevated families that traced their lineage to Genghis Khan; but also a clergy of Arabic origin, including descendants of the Prophet. As Bhavna Dave notes, these “relative newcomers to the steppe ... constituted the learned echelon and served as tutors to the sultans and

¹² Bruce Privatsky, *Muslim Turkistan: Kazak Religion and Collective Memory*, Richmond: Curzon Press, 2001, pp. 53-62.

¹³ Maral Kaynar and Zada Sakhitzhanova, “Pre-Islamic Beliefs of the Kazakhs and the Spread of Islam in Kazakhstan”, in Agnieszka Roguska and Alicja Antas-Jaszczuk, eds., *Transformations in Cultural, Social and Educational Activity: Challenges towards Contemporary Europe*, Siedlce: Siedlce University of Natural Sciences and Humanities, 2016, p. 112-114.

¹⁴ Zhulduz Baizakova and Roger N. McDermott, *Reassessing the Barriers to Islamic Radicalization in Kazakhstan*, Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2015, p. 1.

khans.”¹⁵ This means that the elite among the Kazakhs was certainly Islamized to a considerable degree very early on, including being under the influence of traditional Islamic jurisprudence. As was undoubtedly the case in many societies up until the late twentieth century, scriptural Islam can thus be assumed to have thoroughly penetrated the elite stratum, while the large majority of the Kazakh population practiced “folk Islam,” blending Kazakh customs with Islam in a manner that would only have seemed odd to an outsider. Often, a Shaman embracing Islam would seamlessly turn into a *pir* or *deroish*, i.e. a Sufi master, and the pre-Islamic practices would gradually be Islamized. As has been the case elsewhere, full conversion is a matter of centuries.¹⁶

Russian Colonization and the Rise of Kazakh Nationalism

Russian expansion began in earnest in the seventeenth century, with the fledgling empire’s borders being thrust eastward at break-neck speed. It has often been noted that the Romanovs’ Russia was growing at a rate of 20,000 square miles a year. The constant addition of new territory brought with it the problem of how to consolidate and govern the vast spaces being added to the dominion of the Tsars. St. Petersburg responded by encouraging a settlement program, founding cities around military garrisons and promoting resettlement from its Slavic heartland. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the territory of modern Kazakhstan had become part of Nicholas I’s empire. Administrative centers grew around military outposts, but for most Kazakhs the nomadic lifestyle continued unabated.

Initially, Russian suzerainty did not target Islam among the Kazakhs: quite the contrary. In the late eighteenth century, Catherine the Great in fact *encouraged* the strengthening of Islam among nomads. She decreed the

¹⁵ Bhavna Dave, *Kazakhstan: Ethnicity, Language, Power*, New York: Routledge, 2007, p. 32.

¹⁶ Karpát, “The Roots of Kazakh Nationalism”, p. 315.

establishment of mosques and madrasas on the steppe.¹⁷ As Olcott observes, Catherine “had become convinced that the nomads of the steppe could best be civilized by Muslim rather than Christian missionaries.”¹⁸ This notion, which may seem counter-intuitive in hindsight, was based on Russia’s experience with the Tatars – a Turkic people whose Khanate had been subjugated in the mid-sixteenth century, and whose settled, Islamic population was considered a loyal and reliable vassal of Russia. Thus, the Tatar clerical establishment was enlisted to essentially make the unruly nomads of the steppe “more like the Tatars.”¹⁹

Things changed by the mid-nineteenth century. The Kazakhs were now subject to Islamic influences from both north and south: in the north, the Tatars were the main agent of Islamization, while in the south influences from present-day Uzbekistan were more prominent. Russia’s thinking had also begun to change: Russian leaders now appeared to understand that Islam, whether or not it had the “civilizing” impact Catherine had intended, was not necessarily an ally but a potential rival for the loyalty of the nomads. As a result, Russian policies toward religion became increasingly restrictive up to the 1917 revolution. With mixed success, Russian administrators worked to limit the influence of Islam, to close mosques and madrasas.

The abolition of serfdom in 1861 had enormous implications for the steppe. Emancipated peasants were now desperately looking for land; and the empire encouraged the large-scale migration of poor Russian peasants to Siberia and Kazakhstan.²⁰ An 1868 decree declared all Kazakh lands to be

¹⁷ Galina Yemelianova, *Russia and Islam: A Historical Survey*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, p. 58; Gulnar Kendirbay, “The National Liberation Movement of the Kazakh Intelligentsia at the Beginning of the 20th Century”, *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 1 no. 4, p. 490.

¹⁸ Olcott, *The Kazakhs*, p. 102.

¹⁹ Olcott, *The Kazakhs*, p. 102.

²⁰ Catherine Guirkinger and Gani Aldashev, “Clans and Plows: Traditional Institutions and Production Decisions of Kazakhs under Russian Colonial Settlement”, *Journal of Economic History*, vol. 76 no. 1, 2016, p. 86.

“state property,” and “laid the legal framework for the expropriation of formerly communal lands from mobile pastoralists”.²¹ This had the effect of undermining a pastoral lifestyle dependent on communal ownership of land and the availability of large territories for the grazing of livestock. By the 1870s, the imperial administration began to systematically organize the settling of Slavic, agricultural populations on the steppe, and in the following decades the demography of Kazakhstan was fundamentally altered. By the early twentieth century, further land reforms would force the conversion of all “excess land” to farming, something that further undermined nomadism.²² In the course of these decades, a growing proportion of Kazakhs adapted by embracing a semi-nomadic lifestyle, planting crops, and turning their winter sites into permanent residences that always remained populated even if many still migrated seasonally.²³

This social and demographic transformation did not progress peacefully. It led to growing resentment against the imperial government, to tensions and violence between the indigenous and settler population, and to food shortages and starvation among Kazakhs. By contrast, while many Kazakhs were forced to move to a sedentary lifestyle and saw their living standards decline, thousands instead emigrated to China in search of pasture. By the time of the First World War, the living conditions of the Kazakhs had worsened considerably, and food shortages were common. By 1917, land had been awarded to three million settlers, with an equal amount of land reserved in a Public Land Fund for future settlers.²⁴

The straw that broke the camel’s back was the imperial authorities’ decree that 400,000 Central Asians – primarily nomads rather than agricultural

²¹ Ian W. Campbell, *Knowledge and Power on the Russian Steppe, 1845-1917*, Ann Arbor: Ph.D Dissertation, University of Michigan, p. 222.

²² Dave, *Kazakhstan*, p. 37.

²³ Olcott, *The Kazakhs*, p. 97.

²⁴ Olcott, *The Kazakhs*, p. 90.

populations whose labor remained valuable to the empire – would be recruited into the army and sent to the faraway front. The number to be recruited equaled 25 percent of the total male population on Kazakhstan.²⁵ This, following on large-scale requisitioning of food, prompted spontaneous uprisings across the region that were brutally quelled by the Russian authorities.²⁶ Up to 300,000 Kazakhs migrated out of their homeland, primarily to China; a famine ensued that lasted until the early 1920s. Official figures show that over a million-people died as a result.²⁷

In this environment, two chief trends developed among the Kazakh elite: one group of intellectuals, products of Russian schools, at first looked to Russia as a European power that could help modernize and develop Kazakh society; but with time, given Russian policies, they turned against Russia, and worked instead toward an independent Kazakh state. A second group, primarily educated in Islamic schools, were instead attracted to pan-Islamic and subsequently also pan-Turkic ideas. While the two groups differed on the role of religion in society, they maintained a civil relationship and occasionally coordinated their efforts, seeking to maintain unity against the massive challenges the nation faced.

The secular intellectuals hailed from the elite classes of Kazakh society, and particularly from families that had sent their sons to Russian schools in places like Orenburg or Omsk. A first generation, in the second half of the nineteenth century, was strongly pro-Russian, secular, and “saw survival as adaptation to Russian rule”.²⁸ It was symbolized by Chokan Valikhanov, a scion of the khans of the Middle Horde, who struck up a friendship with

²⁵ Emilio Cassese, “Inorodtsy and the Great War: Non-Russian Subjects in Central Asia”, in Antonello Biagini and Giovanna Motta, eds., *The First World War: Analysis and Interpretation*, vol. 2, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, p. 69.

²⁶ Edward Sokol, *The Revolt of 1916 in Russian Central Asia*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016.

²⁷ Kendirbay, “The National Liberation Movement...”, p. 499.

²⁸ Olcott, *The Kazakhs*, p. 106.

Dostoevsky;²⁹ Ybyrai Altynsaryn, the son of a judge who laid the foundations for a secular education system for Kazakhs;³⁰ and Abai Kunanbaev, son of a Middle Horde tribal leader, whose poetry and prose urged Kazakhs to adapt to modernity and to move to a sedentary lifestyle.³¹ Among them, only Kunanbaev – who unlike the two other lived to see the beginning of the 20th century – developed misgivings about Russian colonization. It is this generation of Kazakh intellectuals that was promoted in Soviet historiography.

By contrast, a class of traditionalists appeared as well, itinerant poets or *aqyns* calling themselves the *Zar Zaman* or “troubled times” poets.³² As keepers of an oral tradition, these *aqyns* staunchly defended nomadism and sought a return to a pure Kazakh pastoral lifestyle. Needless to say, they identified Russia as the cause of all ills.³³

The next generation of intellectuals was different: from polar opposites, they moved somewhat closer to each other. The new secular intellectuals remained modernist but grew more hostile to Russian rule; while the new traditionalist intellectuals increasingly supported sedentarization and emphasized Islamization as the solution, instead of a return to nomadism.

²⁹ Kermit MacKenzie, “Chokan Valikhanov: Kazakh Princeling and Scholar”, *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 8 no. 3, 1989; Campbell, *Knowledge and Power*, p. 102-169.

³⁰ Ekrem Ayan, “Çağdaş Kazak Edebiyatın Kurucusu İbray Altınşarin – Hayatı ve Eserleri”, *Journal of Turkish Studies*, vol. 4 no. 8, 2009 (http://journaldatabase.info/articles/founder_contemporary_kazakh_literature.html); Campbell, *Knowledge and Power*, p. 170-242.

³¹ Mustafa Hopaç, “Kazak Aydınlanmasında Aba Kunanbayev Düşüncülerinin Etkileri Üzerinde Bir Deneme”, *Akademik Bakış Dergisi*, no. 37, July-August 2013. (<http://earsiv.odu.edu.tr:8080/xmlui/bitstream/handle/11489/421/35.pdf?sequence=1>)

³² Mayramgül Dıykanbayeva, “Zamane şiirlerinin ilk Temsilcileri Kalıgöl ve Arstanbek”, *Türkiye Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi*, vol. 20 no. 1, 2016. (<http://dergipark.ulakbim.gov.tr/tsadergisi/article/viewFile/5000181775/5000167501>)

³³ Peter Rottier, “Legitimizing the Ata Meken: The Kazakh Intelligentsia Write a History of their Homeland”, *Ab Imperio*, no. 1, 2004, p. 472-473.

The new secular intellectuals were represented by luminaries like Alikhan Bukeikhanov, who would be the founder of the Alash Orda movement, as well as Akhmet Baitursynov, who served as editor of the chief mouthpiece of this group, the *Qazaq* newspaper.³⁴ Other members included Myrzhaqyp Dulatov, Mukhamedjan Tynyshpayev, and Mustafa Shoqayev. They were trained in Russian schools but were informed by the ideas of national self-determination that had been gaining in strength elsewhere in the empire and in Europe. They identified a territorially defined Kazakh homeland, which would be an autonomous or independent state in some form of relationship with Russia. Under such an arrangement, Kazakhs would be able to remain the masters of their homeland; regulate immigration, and ensure the survival and development of their language and customs. Several of their leaders were involved in the Russian Constitutional Democrat (Kadet) Party – Bokeikhanov even served in the party's central committee.³⁵

These intellectuals remained positively inclined toward the modernity that was brought through Russian contact. As such, they supported the sedentarization of the Kazakhs, and the development of secular education. However, they did not necessarily see modernity and Russia as synonymous. Indeed, they viewed Russia as a clear and present threat to the survival of the Kazakh nation. As Bokeikhanov declared, "we are Westernizers. We do not look to the East or the Mongols in our striving to bring our people closer to culture. We know there is no culture there. Our eyes turn to the West."³⁶ As Kendirbaeva relates, in the pages of *Qazaq* Bokeikhanov argued that "the culture of our Russia is low. Russia has no factories and plants capable of producing valuable things. Culture is in

³⁴ Steven Sabol, *Russian Colonization and the Genesis of Kazak National Consciousness*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 73-115.

³⁵ Kendirbay, "The National Liberation Movement...", p. 492.

³⁶ Gulnar Kendirbaeva, "'We are Children of Alash...' The Kazakh Intelligentsia at the Beginning of the 20th Century in Search of National Identity and Prospects of the Cultural Survival of the Kazakh People," *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 18 no. 1, 1999, p. 13

Western Europe: in France, England, Belgium and Germany.”³⁷ Russia was useful to the extent that it was an intermediary through which Kazakhs could reach the West. But increasingly, it is clear, the secular intellectuals viewed the liabilities of inclusion into a Russia as exceeding the benefits, and envisaged an independent future for the Kazakhs.

Their commitment to secularism was ironclad: while many Muslim intellectuals in Russia were attracted to pan-Islamism and saw Sharia law as a viable alternative, Bokeikhanov begged to differ. As Kendirbaeva relates,

Bokeikhanov was definitely against the introduction of the Sharia into Kazakh life, emphasizing that among the Kazakhs the Sharia had never regulated such important legal matters as cattle suits, disputes about dowries and inheritance. The latter were mainly regulated by Kazakh customary law ... ‘There are not even any mullahs knowing the Sharia. The Sharia is a fixed, written law common to all countries and peoples. It is incapable of change and inflexible.’³⁸

These intellectuals lived in an era colored by a growing perception of a Russia in decline following the 1904 Russian defeat in the war with Japan, and the ensuing 1905 revolution and the liberalization that followed. Through their contacts with other minorities and groups agitating in Russian politics at the time, they also came in contact with other nations fighting for greater rights. Influenced by this, the secular intellectuals developed a historical narrative of Kazakhs as a distinct nation that had a distinct territory as their national homeland. Out of this grouping came the Alash Orda movement, which would seek to establish a modern Kazakh state in the aftermath of the 1917 revolution. Importantly, these secular

³⁷ Kendirbaeva, “‘We are Children of Alash...’”, quoting ‘Zhuap khat’ [‘The Letter of Response’], *Qazaq*, no. 122, 1915.

³⁸ Kendirbaeva, “‘We are Children of Alash...’”, quoting ‘Tagy da bi kham bilik’ [‘Once again about judge and judgement’], *Qazaq*, no. 50, 1914.

intellectuals concluded that the interests of the Kazakhs could not be represented by the Muslim faction to the Duma: the concerns of the Kazakhs were different and of another order than those of Tatars or Caucasian Muslims.³⁹

They were challenged by a new generation of Islamic intellectuals. While there were efforts to maintain unity among the Kazakh elite, a break occurred in 1914. Several intellectuals, led by Bakhytzhan Qaratayev, Zhihansha Seidalin and Serali Lapin strongly opposed Bokeikhanov's rejection of Sharia law. Converging in the *Ai Qap* journal, they accused Bokeikhanov of "estranging the Kazakhs from other Muslims and supporting Russianization."⁴⁰ Yet as Uyama notes, the Islamic-minded intellectuals – chiefly natives of southern regions of Kazakhstan – lost this intra-Kazakh conflict: "*Ai-qap* lost its readers and ceased to be published in 1915, whereas *Qazaq* became more and more influential."⁴¹

The Kazakh secular intellectuals reacted with joy to the collapse of Tsarism, and actively supported the Provisional Government, several of their leaders taking positions of Commissars in provinces. A first all-Kazakh Congress was held in Orenburg in July 1917, and for the first time discussed the question of Kazakh autonomy, and resolved to create a Kazakh political party. This would become the Alash Orda movement. The Party favored a democratic, federal Russian state, with a Duma elected by universal adult suffrage. Kazakh provinces would be autonomous, have their own army, and be able to put an end to immigration of Russian peasants until land had been distributed among the Kazakhs. Importantly, the program provided

³⁹ Campbell, *Creating the Kazakh Nation*, p. 135.

⁴⁰ Uyama, "The Geography of Civilizations: a Spatial Analysis of the Kazakh Intelligentsia's Activities, from the Mid-Nineteenth to the Early Twentieth Century," in Kimitaka Matsuzato, ed., *Regions: A Prism to View the Slavic-Eurasian World*, Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, 2000, p. 84.

⁴¹ Uyama, "The Geography of Civilizations", p. 84.

for the separation of religion and politics, restricting the role of Islamic clergy to life-cycle rituals.⁴²

The Bolshevik revolution prompted the convocation of a second all-Kazakh Congress, which decided to set up an Alash Orda autonomous government in Semey as a provisional capital. It would be governed by a provisional council consisting of 15 Kazakhs and 10 members of non-Kazakh nationalities, primarily Russians. The Alash leaders tried to negotiate with the Bolsheviks in order to be recognized as a Kazakh autonomy within the framework of the Soviet Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia.⁴³ But while the talks continued, the Bolshevik leadership had other plans: it determined that the Alash government was a “bourgeois constitutional-democratic organization”, and sought to arrest Bokeikhanov; the Bolsheviks, meanwhile, established a separate process to set up a Kazakh autonomous republic, bypassing the Alash leaders. As Russia fell into civil war, the Alash government was forced to recalibrate, and to reach out to the Provisional Siberian Government, under the control of the White armies. White and Cossack forces indeed agreed to arm Alash government forces, which were being established with a view to assert Kazakh autonomy. As they were temporarily able to keep Bolshevik forces at bay, the Alash government was able to continue to exist, even though the White forces demanded its abolition and form a subjugation to White leadership. By mid-1919, when the White fortunes turned sour, the Alash leaders once again tried to strike a deal with the Bolsheviks. A temporary alliance was struck, and Alash leaders took up positions with the victorious Soviet government. But the relief was temporary. Aside from continuing famines, which the Soviets did little to alleviate, life returned to normal mainly because the

⁴² Kendirbay, “The National Liberation Movement...”, p. 502.

⁴³ Campbell, p. 347.

Soviet leadership was content to allow Kazakhs largely to mind their own affairs while they consolidated control over the country.⁴⁴

This overview suggests that at the time of Sovietization, the Kazakhs had begun to develop a nascent national elite, which was in the process of building the fundamentals of a nation-state. Similar to other Turkic nations like Turkey and Azerbaijan, the Kazakh elite was embroiled in a serious debate about the role of religion in their emerging state: and just like in Turkey and Azerbaijan, the notion of secular statehood emerged victorious. In other words, secular governance in Kazakhstan is not solely a product of Soviet rule: it had important pre-Soviet antecedents.

The Soviet Era

The impact of seventy years of Soviet rule on the peoples of the Union have been the subject of extensive debate in the past quarter century. The positives of the Soviet experience are well-known: Sovietization brought industrialization, the emancipation of women, and the advent of modern infrastructure and education. The negatives are equally if not better documented: the brutality of Soviet repression, the absurdity of its economic system, and the lingering effects of Communist ideology on the societies affected by it – not to mention the legacy of corruption, whose prevalence in Central Asia today is a direct inheritance from Soviet times.⁴⁵ The case of Kazakhstan, however, stands out because of the genocidal effect of the politically induced famine of 1930-33.⁴⁶ Not only was the relative impact of the famine even more pronounced than the Ukrainian Holodomor: a quarter

⁴⁴ Olcott, *The Kazakhs*, 145-159.

⁴⁵ S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, *The Long Game on the Silk Road: U.S. and EU Strategy for Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018, pp. 15-38.

⁴⁶ Robert Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 189-198; Niccoló Pianciola, "The Collectivization Famine in Kazakhstan, 1931-33", *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, vol. 25 no. 3/4, 2001, p. 237-251; Sarah Cameron, "The Kazakh Famine of 1930-33: Current Research and New Directions", *East-West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies*, vol. 3 no. 2, 2016.

of the republic's population died, but the effects were uneven: while 57 percent of the territory's population was ethnically Kazakh before the famine, over 85 percent of the deaths were Kazakh. All in all, over a third of the Kazakh nation perished; hundreds of thousands more fled Kazakhstan, many never to return. This tragedy occurred on top of earlier famines in the late nineteenth century and that following the crushing of the 1916 revolt. And unlike in other parts of the USSR, the famine permanently changed the social organization of the Kazakhs: given the destruction of over 90 percent of the livestock in the republic, pastoralism was now effectively, and brutally, a thing of the past. The battered remains of the Kazakh nation were now forcibly settled, as a minority in their own land. In spite of the scale of this event, it has yet to be the subject of extensive research.⁴⁷

As for the fate of religion in the Soviet era, it is considerably more complex than meets the eye. The common narrative is one of a wholesale onslaught on religion, and particularly Islam. The statistics to back up this narrative are widely available: from thousands of mosques and madrasas in the 1910s, only a handful remained by the mid-1920s. State atheism was relentlessly propagated, particularly in the period between the world wars. Even after repression against religion softened and state religious institutions were set up, religion was effectively curbed from public life, and certainly had no place in the judicial system and the education sector.⁴⁸ As a result, it is often assumed that the Soviet experience led to a large-scale secularization not only of the state and its institutions, but also a removal of religion from the lives of Central Asians, especially the Kazakhs.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ That lacuna will partly be ameliorated with the publication of Sarah Cameron's *The Hungry Steppe: Famine, Violence and the Making of Soviet Kazakhstan*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018 (forthcoming) based on her dissertation with the same name, defended at Yale in 2010.

⁴⁸ Shoshana Keller, *To Moscow, Not Mecca: The Soviet Campaign against Islam in Central Asia, 1917–1941*, Westport: Praeger, 2001.

⁴⁹ E.g. Yaacov Ro'i, *Islam in the Soviet Union*, London: Hurst, 2000.

In recent years, however, this narrative has come to be challenged by indigenous as well as foreign scholars, who have decried, in particular, the methods and assumptions of western scholars of Islam in the Soviet era, which they accuse of having accepted many Soviet assumptions about religion.⁵⁰ This is not the place to re-litigate these debates. Suffice it to note that part of the disagreement concerns the definition of religion and religiosity – a subject that may seem arcane. However, it affects the assumption that Islam in Kazakhstan was already weak and practically destroyed, simply because most Kazakhs – including their religious officials – were not well versed in the theology and rituals of Islam. Such a perspective misses the point, however, that Muslim identity remained strong and may even have been strengthened during the Soviet period. Of course, some of these points were recognized by Soviet-era western scholars: In a 1979 study, Rasma Karklins interviewed ethnic German emigrés from Central Asia, and showed that Central Asians, including Kazakhs, insisted on maintaining strong elements of Islamic identity, ranging from life cycle rituals and observance of prayers and fasting to strong endogamous practices. As Karklins concluded, “there can be no doubt that the particularism of Soviet Muslim society persists to this day.”⁵¹ As such, the attempt to create a *Homo Sovieticus* was a distinct failure. While Central Asians may not have been conversant in theological matters, being Muslim was a key element of their identity. In a sense, therefore, Soviet atheism failed to achieve its stated goal of abolishing religion; but it succeeded in secularizing the state. It removed religious references from public life, and ensured that law and education were not guided by religious

⁵⁰ Examples include DeWeese, “Islam and the Legacy of Sovietology”; Privatsky, *Muslim Turkistan*; Morrison, “Teaching the Islamic History.”

⁵¹ Rasma Karklins, “Islam: How Strong Is It in the Soviet Union? Inquiry Based on Oral Interviews with Soviet Germans Repatriated from Central Asia in 1979”, *Cahiers du Monde Russe et Soviétique*, vol. 21 no. 1, 1980, p. 65-81. (http://www.persee.fr/doc/cmnr_0008-0160_1980_num_21_1_1374)

dogma. The downside is that it was guided by the quasi-religious dogma of Communism.

Equally significant was the peculiar attitude of Soviet authorities to Islam. One could be forgiven for assuming that Soviet authorities would have been more concerned about radical, puritan Islamic perspectives than the folk Islam practiced in Central Asia. Yet the evidence is by now conclusive that the opposite was the case: the Soviet authorities appear to have taken their aim squarely at the folk Islam that was widespread and which they considered backward. By contrast, they tolerated the importation into Central Asia of orthodox theological currents inspired by Salafism and the stricter Shafi'i and Hanbali *madhabs*. This is indeed counter-intuitive, unless one recalls the Soviet penchant for sowing division: just as Moscow encouraged the splintering of the Muslim peoples of Central Asia and Western Siberia into eight different territorial entities, they may also have found the splintering of the religious community itself to be in its interest. Thus, with the repression of the hitherto dominant Sufi brotherhoods, the vacuum was filled by conservative theologians who taught a more orthodox, scriptural Islam.

One key figure in this tale is the theologian al-Shami al-Tarabulsi, who came to Central Asia in 1919 from Kashgar.⁵² Known as Shami Domulla in Central Asia, the Lebanese-born theologian was a graduate of Al-Azhar, who had been accused of Wahhabism by the Ottoman authorities and expelled from the empire. While the Hanafi establishment in Central Asia benefited from the repression of the Sufis, al-Shami forcefully endorsed the Bolshevik destruction of saints' tombs, even taking up a shovel himself for that purpose. But unlike the indigenous theologians, al-Shami was trained in the

⁵² Naumkin cites a date from the early 1920s, while Peyrouse and Olcott both state that he arrived in Tashkent in 1919. Vitaly Naumkin, *Radical Islam in Central Asia: Between Pen and Rifle*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005, p. 40. Sébastien Peyrouse, "The Rise of Political Islam in Soviet Central Asia", *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, vol. 5, 2007, p. 41; Martha Brill Olcott, *In the Whirlwind of Jihad*, Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012, p. 81.

Shafi'i school. Aside from his apparent sympathies for socialism, he also had a strong Salafi bent to his theological reasoning. As Peyrouse puts it,

His mode of thinking was overtly Salafi: he refused the heritage of the medieval ulamas and proclaimed that the way to deal with contemporary problems was by returning to the sources of Islam, that is, the Quran and the authentic Hadith of the Prophet. He denounced the population's ignorance on matters of Islamic dogma and was particularly opposed to the cult of saint worship, which had been a predominant feature in the religious life of Central Asian populations.⁵³

Al-Shami fell out of favor with the authorities toward the late 1920s, but by then, he had already made a strong mark on the theological establishment that would come to dominate Central Asia in coming decades. His disciples joined together in a community called the *Jamaat Ahl-al Hadith*, because they only recognized the Qur'an and "original" hadiths as fully Islamic. While some of the members died in the 1937 terror, a number survived, and were freed from prison in 1941-42 during Stalin's religious thaw – including Ishan Babakhan and his son, Ziyauddin. The pair were received by Uzbek communist leaders, and the senior Babakhan was appointed to head the newly formed Soviet spiritual directorate, SADUM. In 1947, both were allowed to perform the Hajj and to travel to Al-Azhar; three generations from the Babakhan family would remain at the helm of SADUM for a half century, until 1989.⁵⁴

In other words, the Soviet institution designed to regulate and control religion was taken over by a family deeply steeped in Salafi theology, and were hostile both to the folk Sufi Islam and to the indigenous Hanafi jurisprudence of Central Asia. And while the Babakhans appeared outwardly to respect both Hanafi tradition and the Naqshbandi order – the

⁵³ Peyrouse, "The Rise of Political Islam...", p. 41.

⁵⁴ Olcott, *In the Whirlwind*, p. 81-90.

only Sufi order that is thoroughly compatible with Sharia – they also systematically worked to introduce narrower interpretations of religion based on Shafi’i jurisprudence and inspired by Salafi ideas. From the 1960s onward, they were allowed to repeatedly travel to the Middle East, from where they brought back religious literature that was very much in line with these preferences rather than the Hanafi tradition indigenous to Central Asia.⁵⁵

This, of course, in due time led to conflict between the Salafi-minded reformers and Hanafi traditionalists, which were led by Muhammadjon Hindustani. Hindustani, who spent the last decades of his life running Islamic education to select students in his home, devoted his life to maintaining the Hanafi tradition and remained respectful of the Sufi currents. Nevertheless, his balancing act required an acutely tuned ear to the political realities of the Soviet Union; after all, he did provide Islamic teaching to the Chairman of Tajikistan’s Council of Ministers, indicating the extent to which there was a local interest, even among the Central Asian Communist leadership, in religion.⁵⁶ In turn, this led a number of his more impatient disciples to defect to the more radical faction, accusing him of being too respectful of atheist authorities.⁵⁷

While the discussion above focuses on Uzbek and Tajik theologians, it was they who dominated the religious scene in all Central Asia; and indeed, it was this curious game of shadows between atheist communists, Hanafi traditionalists, and assertive Salafis that set the tone for the framework of Islamic activity in Central Asia in the Soviet era – and indeed, for the situation at independence. All major actors on the Islamic scene in the first decade of independence and beyond were formed in this environment. Nor was this type of manipulation an isolated instance; while only parcels of the

⁵⁵ Peyrouse, “The Rise of Political Islam...”, p. 43.

⁵⁶ Naumkin, *Radical Islam*, p. 52.

⁵⁷ Olcott, *The Kazakhs*, pp. 93-97

full story have become publicly available, the Soviet tactics were still at work in the 1980s. Vitaly Naumkin's experience is telling:

I was startled when I learned from a former Uzbek Communist ideologist whom I interviewed in the 1990s that even in the late 1980s the Communist leadership in Tashkent had been ordering the party committees in a secret circular to support Salafis in order to use them against the influential and therefore dangerous traditional Islam ... This ideologist considered it rather funny. 'We couldn't have imagined into what a monster this Wahhabi movement here would turn', he told me.⁵⁸

In sum, what occurred during the Soviet era in Kazakhstan and Central Asia was not simply the attempted destruction of the traditional and folk Islam practiced in the region, which ran deep in indigenous society. By default as well as by design, the Soviet leadership – central as well as local – was complicit in permitting this void to be filled not just by Marxist-Leninist ideology, as is commonly assumed – but also by a purposefully orchestrated competition between traditionalist Hanafi Islam and a Salafi-inclined tendency with growing direct as well as indirect ties to the Middle Eastern heartland.

⁵⁸ Naumkin, *Radical Islam*, p. 52.

Religion in Kazakhstani Society and the International Context

Following independence, Kazakhstani society went through rapid changes in all spheres of life: from the economic and political to the social and ideological. Most important, perhaps, was the quest for identity. The Soviet Union had provided a stable, if deficient, framework for the identity of the population, shielding it from the marketplace of ideas outside of its boundaries. It should be recalled that Soviet citizens had extremely limited interaction with the outside world; but with independence, they suddenly became exposed to influences from all directions. Moreover, everywhere in the post-Communist world, religion made a powerful comeback in society. Individuals and communities of all background, seeking meaning in the convulsions of independence, turned their interest to the existential questions of religion. And while one potential answer lay in rediscovering the ancient traditions of one's ancestry, this was not the sole option: foreign religious influences rapidly entered the scene, competing for the attention of post-Soviet populations.

Given Kazakhstan's demographics, this religious revival featured a multitude of options. Among ethnic Kazakhs, the default options included the Hanafi Islam that had been traditionally dominant in the region, and the Sufi heritage that to a significant extent had been broken. A resurgence of interest in Tengriism should also be mentioned, though it has not asserted itself as a powerful force.⁵⁹ Among Christians, the chief default option was the Russian Orthodox Church, itself a transnational actor given the

⁵⁹ Marlene Laruelle, "Religious Revival, Nationalism, and the 'Invention of Tradition': Political Tengriism in Central Asia and Tatarstan", *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 26 no. 2, 2007.

orientation of Orthodox parishes in Kazakhstan toward Moscow. But aside from these, Muslim and Christian movements from abroad rapidly arrive in the region. These included Turkish, Arab, North Caucasian, and South Asian Islamic groups; and a plethora of Christian churches and sects, originating in the West as well as in places like South Korea. Among these were groups with a purely religious agenda as well as those with ambitious political objectives.

Islam in Contemporary Kazakhstan

When Kazakhstan became independent, and the inevitable quest for a national identity was embarked upon, this coincided with newfound opportunities to restore religion to its normal place in society. As will be seen in the next chapter, the state soon decided to support the restoration of the religious practices deemed traditional in society – primarily Hanafi Sunni Islam and Orthodox Christianity. But it was by no means a foregone conclusion that these traditional religions would restore their erstwhile dominance: the Soviet experience had fundamentally changed the religious landscape in the country. Past practices could not be retrieved, and a simple return to the pre-Soviet *status quo* proved all but impossible. The Orthodox community was in itself not independent; it would be influenced heavily by the evolution of the Orthodox Church in Russia. As for the majority Muslim population, it faced perhaps even greater challenges. The “folk Islam” of pre-Soviet Kazakhstan had been thoroughly destroyed by the Soviet experience, as the very society it was based on – the nomadic Kazakh society pre-collectivization – was no more. The practice of saint worship was restored, and shrines rebuilt; but the content of this religious practice was by necessity novel. Similarly, the Hanafi ulama of pre-Soviet times had been thoroughly transformed by the Soviet period, and in particular by the alien influences that the Soviet clerical authorities had encouraged. Because Kazakhstan itself had been dominated by Islamic religious authorities based

either in Kazan or Tashkent, the emergence of an indigenous Kazakh religious hierarchy after independence would necessarily be influenced by foreign sources.

This prompted a situation in which, much like in the past, religious impulses from abroad once again made their way into the country – reflecting some of the changes taking place around the world. This development was of course not limited to Islam. Kazakhstani Muslims faced a myriad of Islamic movements competing for influence in what they saw as a religious “Terra Nullius,” with influences ranging from Turkey, the North Caucasus, the Gulf and South Asia. Christian missionaries including protestant denominations from Europe, North America and South Korea joined the fray, targeting both the Russian Orthodox community and urbanized ethnic Kazakhs for conversion. To top this off, new religious cults also made their way into the country.

Independence led to an “unprecedented interest in rediscovery of the past,”⁶⁰ as well as a burst of mosque-building that continued unabated for 20 years. Indeed, Kazakhstan took the regional lead in the number of mosques built: by 2013, it sported over 3,200 places of worship, of which over 2,300 were mosques – a larger number than Uzbekistan, in spite of that country’s twice larger population of Muslims.⁶¹ This rapid growth of mosques posed a serious human resource problem: staffing these mosques required a similar number of trained imams, something that simply did not exist in the country. This made the subject of religious education central to the development of Islam in the country.⁶² While this was theoretically the domain of the newly established Muftiat of Kazakhstan, in practice many

⁶⁰ Adeeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism*, p. 126.

⁶¹ “Kazakhstan Leads in Number of Mosques in Central Asia”, *Bnews.kz*, May 15, 2013.

(https://bnews.kz/en/news/obshchestvo/kazakhstan_leads_in_number_of_mosques_in_central_asia)

⁶² Dilshod Achilov, “Islamic Education in Central Asia: Evidence from Kazakhstan,” *Asia Policy*, no. 14, 2012.

mosques were staffed with Imams with poor training or subjected to foreign religious influences.

Survey evidence indicates that Kazakhstan's population has developed a stronger level of religiosity. Up to 80 percent of the population consider themselves religious, the number being somewhat higher for ethnic Russians than for Kazakhs. However, the vast majority of these – at least amounting to 50 percent of the population, do not actually practice religion, or practice religion only “partly” in daily life.⁶³

Survey research also suggests that Islam in Kazakhstan has remained largely the domain of individual belief, and not translated into politics. Thus, a 2013 global Pew survey of Muslims' attitudes provides important data of what being Muslim actually means in Kazakhstan compared to other areas of the Muslim world.

Kazakhstan's Muslims stand out in international comparison by opposing political manifestations of religion. Thus, Kazakhstan has among the lowest levels of support of any Muslim country for Sharia law: only 10 percent of Kazakhs support it, the lowest level anywhere except Azerbaijan. This low level of support for Sharia differs markedly from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, where between a quarter and a third of respondents expressed support for Islamic law.⁶⁴ Even among Kazakh Muslims who support Sharia, only four percent approve of the death penalty for leaving Islam – comparing to 86 percent of pro-Sharia Egyptians, and 76 percent of Pakistanis. Only 31 percent of pro-Sharia Kazakhs approve of corporal punishment.⁶⁵ Similarly, only one percent of Kazakhstan's Muslims thought suicide bombings could

⁶³ Achilov, “Islamic Education”, p. 85; Friederich Ebert Foundation, *Molodezh Tsentralnoy Azii: Kazakhstan*, Astana, 2016, p. 102-106.

⁶⁴ Pew Research Center, *The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society*, Washington DC, 2013, p.15. (<http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2013/04/worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-full-report.pdf>)

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p. 52-55.

be justified, with 95 percent saying it is not. Only three percent supported a large role for religious leaders in politics, with twenty percent supporting “some” role for them. These were among the lowest levels of any country surveyed.⁶⁶ By contrast, 46 percent of Muslims expressed concern with “Muslim extremists”, among the higher levels in the survey.

Kazakhstan’s Muslims also appear to have a liberal interpretation of religious stipulations in private life. A relatively low 51 percent believe women must always obey their husband,⁶⁷ and 56 percent of Muslims say it is not necessary to believe in God to be moral. This figure was the highest by far in the sample, with only Ghana and Liberia coming close.⁶⁸ Similarly, 49 percent of Kazakh Muslims agree that many religions lead to heaven, with only 29 percent saying Islam alone does. Most Middle Eastern countries found only 3-7 percent agreeing with the near-majority of Kazakhs on this point. Even in the rest of Central Asia, figures are between 10 and 20 percent. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that Kazakhstan’s traditional Tengriism, and the coexistence of large Christian and Muslim communities, have contributed to this figure. A full 79 percent of Kazakh Muslims believe in evolution, the highest of any country surveyed.⁶⁹ Seventy-seven percent of Muslims in Kazakhstan disagree with the notion that converting others is a religious duty. Only Indonesia and southeastern European countries like Albania have comparable figures.⁷⁰ A mere six percent think there is hostility between Christians and Muslims; 52 percent say the two religions have a lot in common.⁷¹ A full 84 percent say honor killings are never justified, and the number remains the same whether the offending part is female or male.⁷² In sum, Kazakhstani Muslims in many respects stand out

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 115-121.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 89.

not only in global perspective but even in regional perspective: they appear to have a most liberal interpretation of religious duties, and strongly supportive of inter-faith harmony and dialogue.

Revival of Christianity

Russian Orthodox Christianity, Catholicism, various Protestant movements, as well as so-called new religious movements all have communities of adherents in Kazakhstan. Concomitant with the end of the Soviet Union, the Orthodox Church greatly increased in importance across the post-Soviet space. The Church made significant gains filling the void left by the Soviet Union as a provider of both social services and ideology. As Russian nationalism became a more potent tool for Moscow's domestic and foreign policy priorities, the Russian Orthodox Church was able to secure a key position in the new Russia. This marriage of ethno-religious identity with the many narratives used as policy tools by the Russian government inserted the Church in tense social environments in places like Ukraine, the Baltics and Kazakhstan. The virtual monopoly of the information sphere enjoyed by Russian language media in post-Soviet Central Asia, as well as anxiety induced by the loss of status within the ethnic Russian community, have contributed to a revitalization of Orthodox Christianity in Kazakhstan.

Russian Orthodoxy was not the only religion affiliated with an ethnic group to ride on the wings of "de-Sovietification." Catholic minorities of Poles, Lithuanian and Latvians, as well as some Germans and Koreans, were able to reestablish ties with the Vatican. Especially the Polish minority, though small, benefitted from revitalized ties with the new Polish government, and the result was some 90 Catholic communities coming into existence.⁷³ But by far the largest group of Christian organizations is made up of the various Protestant groups that directed their missionary efforts to the post-Soviet

⁷³ Zauresh Utebaeva and Aigerim Saktaganova "Religions in Kazakhstan at the Present Time," *Education and Science without Borders*, n.d.

world. Well-funded and organized, with significant backing from abroad and long-standing commitment to missionary work, many of these spiritual movements were able to make significant inroads. By 2008, adherents of Protestant Christian groups including Baptists, Lutherans, Pentecostals and Seventh Day Adventists had registered a total of 1180 religious organizations in Kazakhstan.⁷⁴ It should be noted that Protestant Christianity was not new to the republic: In 1989, some 168 Evangelical Christian and 171 Lutheran organizations were registered in the Kazakh SSR, which had a total of 671 religious organization at the time. This number was significantly larger than the 46 registered Islamic associations.⁷⁵ Of course, the average number of members of these communities is small, compared to the millions that adhere to the traditionally recognized mainstream communities of Hanafi Sunni Islam and Russian Orthodoxy.

External Religious Impulses

As in the rest of Central Asia, the external influences on Islam in Kazakhstan are plentiful, the main sources being the Gulf, South Asia, Turkey, and the North Caucasus. As discussed previously, connections were developed during Soviet times between Central Asia and Islamic movements in South Asia and the Gulf. Those connections were largely underground and had a powerful impact on the radicalization of Central Asian Islamists in the transition to independence. These were, however, mainly effective in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. In Kazakhstan, external influences developed an influence only following the transition to independence.

Turkish Islamic movements have tended to receive a warmer welcome than others in Kazakhstan. Indeed, the Turkish effort to blend a secular state with

⁷⁴ Roman Podoprighora, "Kazakhstan: National Report for the IAACL Congress," in Javier Martinez-Torron and W. Cole Durham, Jr., eds., *Religion and the Secular State: National Reports*, Madrid: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Facultad de Derecho de la Universidad Complutense, 2015. (<https://www.iclrs.org/content/blurp/files/Kazakhstan.pdf>)

⁷⁵ V. Ivanov and Ya. Trofimov, *Religii v Kazakhstane*, Almaty: Adilet, 1999.

support for traditional religion was seen as a potential model by governments across Central Asia. This enabled Turkish Islamic groups to operate with relative ease in Kazakhstan. The Turkish state, through the foundation of its Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*), took a direct role in building or restoring mosques across the region, in printing and distributing religious literature, and in setting up theology studies on the Turkish model.⁷⁶ In addition, with tacit support from the state, Turkish religious communities have been active in the region. These have included numerous branches and offshoots of the Naqshbandi movement, particularly the Erenköy lodge and the Süleymancı faction – which, although very poorly known, also operates a large number of mosques and Islamic education facilities abroad, particularly in Germany.⁷⁷ This rather austere movement has been influential in operating after-school programs for Quranic education.⁷⁸ Much more well-known are the activities of the Fethullah Gülen movement, which opened schools as well as universities and dormitories, and achieved considerable success in Kazakhstan.⁷⁹ Since these schools provided high-quality secular education, yet in a conservative religious environment, they soon became popular with elites. Yet while the Turkish government long endorsed the schools, the deepening conflict between the Turkish government and the Gülen movement from 2013 onward shattered the Gülen movement's image as an avowedly non-political movement and led to greater suspicion of its intentions.

Much like the rest of the Muslim world, Kazakhstan has been exposed to the spread of Salafi ideology in its different variants, ranging from the "quietist"

⁷⁶ Bayram Balcı, "Turkey's Religious Outreach and the Turkic World", *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, March 2014.

⁷⁷ Yıldız Atasoy, *Turkey, Islamists and Democracy*, London: IB Tauris, 2005, p. 144.

⁷⁸ Dilshod Achilov, "Islamic Education in Central Asia: Evidence from Kazakhstan," *Asia Policy*, no. 14 2012, p. 97.

⁷⁹ Bayram Balcı, "Fethullah Gülen's Missionary Schools in Central Asia and their Role in the Spreading of Turkism and Islam", *Religion, State and Society*, vol. 31 no. 2, 2003.

Salafis that eschew any interaction with the state to the *takfiri* and *jihadi* variants.⁸⁰ These movements have spread in great part as a result of sponsorship by wealthy forces in the Gulf, particularly Saudi Arabia but also Kuwait and Qatar.

The Salafi current has the innate advantage of being the official form of Islam in the most holy of sites in the Muslim world. To a Muslim from the post-Soviet space, this naturally results in a tendency to question whether their own, traditional Islam – let alone the one promoted by the government – is more correct than the one practiced in Mecca and Medina. Of course, this misses the fact that the reform movement led by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in the late eighteenth century altered, rather than returned to, the Islam practiced by the actual *Salafs*, or followers of the Prophet, and was considerably more austere.⁸¹ But the simplistic message of the Salafi movement has proven attractive to modern recruits, who feel little attraction to the traditional “folk” Islam of their parents, and who are attracted to the textual references of the Salafi school as opposed to the oral or mystical traditions in their homeland.⁸² Indeed, the attraction of Wahhabi ideas may rest exactly with what some have called their “extreme hostility to any form of intellectualism.”⁸³

In practice, Salafi expansion was directly linked to the funding provided by wealthy Gulf individuals and foundations. These welcomed and funded would-be Islamic scholars to study at Salafi-inspired educational institutions, from which they returned home and contributed to the

⁸⁰ Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement”, *Studies in conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 29 no. 3, 2006, 207-239.

⁸¹ Stephen Schwartz, *The Two Faces of Islam*, New York: Doubleday, 2003.

⁸² Sadek Hamid, “The Attraction of ‘Authentic’ Islam: Salafism and British Muslim Youth”, in Roel Meijer, ed., *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 385.

⁸³ Khaled Abou el Fadl, “The Orphans of Modernity and the Clash of Civilizations”, *Global Dialogue*, Spring 2002, p. 11.

spreading of Salafi ideology. Similarly, donors from the Gulf provided funding for the construction of mosques, but also ensured that the Imams appointed to these mosques were Salafi in orientation. This gradually resulted in a growing dominance of radical Salafi ideology in Islamic educational institutions far beyond the Gulf region itself – something Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, in a 2015 speech, in effect blamed even the famed al-Azhar university of having succumbed to.⁸⁴ This is particularly important in the case of Kazakhstan, given the prominent role of Egypt and al-Azhar in the setting up of the Nur-Mubarak University, the chief officially sanctioned seat of Islamic education in Kazakhstan.

While it does not originate in the Gulf, the influence of Hizb-ut-Tahrir is part and parcel of the Salafi tendency.⁸⁵ This global organization is dedicated to the re-establishment of the Caliphate, and while it professes to be peaceful, the organization espouses a radical and intolerant ideology that effectively legitimizes violence.⁸⁶ Hizb-ut-Tahrir paid particular attention to Central Asia, and appeared in southern Kazakhstan in 1998.⁸⁷ Karagiannis estimates that the movement had as much as a thousand members, primarily in the south of Kazakhstan. The group first spread among ethnic Uzbeks, as it did in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, but subsequently spread among ethnic Kazakhs as well.⁸⁸ In the mid-2000s, however, Kazakh authorities began to crack down on Hizb ut-Tahrir, and the organization was banned in 2005.

⁸⁴ Jacques Neria, "Egyptian President Sisi Calls for Reform of Islam", Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, February 15, 2015. (<http://jcpa.org/article/sisi-calls-for-reform-of-islam/>)

⁸⁵ Babajanov, Malikov, and Nazarov, "Islam in the Ferghana Valley: Between National Identity and Islamic Alternative"; Jacob Zenn and Kathleen Kuehnast, "Preventing Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan", U.S. Institute of Peace, Special Report 355, October 2014. (https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR355_Preventing-Violent-Extremism-in-Kyrgyzstan.pdf)

⁸⁶ Zeyno Baran, *Hizb-ut-Tahrir: Islam's Political Insurgency*, Washington: Hudson Institute, December 2004, p. 48. (http://www.bits.de/public/documents/US_Terrorist_Attacks/Hizbut-ahrirIslam'sPoliticalInsurgency.pdf), p. 11.

⁸⁷ Emmanuel Karagiannis, "The Rise of Political Islam in Kazakhstan: Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami", *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, vol. 13 no. 2, 2007, p. 302.

⁸⁸ Karagiannis, "The Rise of...", p. 302-305.

These efforts appear to have gradually subdued the influence of this radical movement in the country. While it likely retains a certain following in southern Kazakhstan, it is far from the high profile it sported a decade ago.⁸⁹

The influence of Gulf-inspired Islamic organizations proved pervasive: in 2004, Kazakhstan's Ministry of Education closed down the South Kazakhstan Humanitarian Academy, funded by the Kuwaiti Social Reform Society, as the school was found to have a curriculum promoting radical Islam.⁹⁰

A further important Islamic influence on Kazakhstan is South Asia, particularly the Deobandi school, a nominally Hanafi movement heavily influenced by Salafism.⁹¹ As noted, the authoritative Soviet-era theologian Muhammedjon Rustamov was known as "Hindustani" because of his studies at the madrasa in Deoband.⁹² Madrasas in the subcontinent thus formed an important source of Islamic learning for Central Asian Muslims, and this only grew following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan – when the madrasas operated by the Jamiat-i-Ulema-i-Islam in the Northwest Frontier Province of Pakistan became the breeding ground for what would become the Taliban movement. The Deobandi influence is visible also through Jamaat al-Tabligh, a Deobandi movement that seeks to promote Islamic values and lifestyle globally. Unlike Hizb-ut-Tahrir, it lacks an overt political agenda, and focuses exclusively on the substance of the religion and

⁸⁹ Roger McDermott, "Kazakhstan Cracking Down on Hizb-ut Tahrir", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 4 no. 162, September 4, 2007. (<https://jamestown.org/program/kazakhstan-cracking-down-on-hizb-ut-tahrir/>)

⁹⁰ Karagiannis, "The Rise of...", p. 302.

⁹¹ Arshi Saleem Hashmi, "Historical Roots of the Deobandi Version of Jihadism and Its Implications for Violence in Today's Pakistan", in Jawad Syed et. al., *Faith-Based Violence and Deobandi Militancy in Pakistan*, London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016, p. 137.

⁹² See Naumkin, *Radical Islam*, pp. 43-55; Michael Fredholm, "Islamic Extremism as a Political Force: A Comparative Study of Central Asian Extremists Movements", Stockholm University, Asian Cultures and Modernity, Research Report no. 12, October 2006, pp. 9-10. (<http://gpf-europe.com/upload/iblock/874/fredholm%20islamic%20extremism%20in%20central%20asia%20rr12.pdf>)

individual proselytizing. While non-political, however, the creed of Jamaat al-Tablighi is “hardly distinguishable from the radical Wahhabi-Salafi jihadist ideology.”⁹³ Indeed, numerous studies have shown that while the decentralized Tablighi movement is not itself a violent organization, its membership has been a prime target of recruitment for violent groups from Harkat ul-Mujahideen to Al Qaeda.⁹⁴ The movement’s character has led to differing responses from regional governments: Bayram Balci has noted that it is “quite visible in Kazakhstan.”⁹⁵ It was banned as an extremist group in 2013, and its adherents are occasionally arrested and imprisoned for membership in an extremist group. Another South Asian religious group to have gained adherents in Kazakhstan is the *Ahmadi* or Qadiani Muslim community, which is considered heretical by Sunni Muslims. While small, the community has been spreading among primarily educated Kazakh citizens.⁹⁶

A final source of Islamic influences is the North Caucasus. Dagestan, in particular, has stood out as a source of radical Islamic ideas. Within the North Caucasus itself, there has been a growing struggle between traditionalist, Sufi practices and a Salafi movement that gained strength in the 1990s. It is this latter movement that spread to influence large areas of Russia, the South Caucasus, and western Kazakhstan. While southern Kazakhstan is traditionally linked to religious processes in Uzbekistan, geographic proximity has made western Kazakhstan prone to religious influence from the North Caucasus.

⁹³ Alex Alexiev, “Tablighi Jamaat: Jihad’s Stealthy Legions”, *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2005, p. 4.

⁹⁴ Susan Sachs, “A Muslim Missionary Group Draws New Scrutiny in the U.S.”, *New York Times*, July 14, 2003. (<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/07/14/us/a-muslim-missionary-group-draws-new-scrutiny-in-us.html?mcubz=1>)

⁹⁵ Bayram, Balci, “Reviving Central Asia’s Religious Ties with the Indian Subcontinent? The Jamaat al Tablighi”, *Religion, State and Society*, vol. 43 no. 1, 2015, p. 26.

⁹⁶ Rorlich, “Islam, Identity, Politics: Kazakhstan, 1990-2000,” p. 172.

Extremist and Terrorist Groups in Kazakhstan

The record of extremist and terrorist groups in Kazakhstan diverges from the broader Central Asian record, and particularly from the experience of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. In the latter cases, extremist organizations were a serious factor during the transition to independence, and in the first decade following independence. Extremist groups arose in Uzbekistan's section of the Ferghana valley even before independence, and while they were evicted from the country in early 1992, terrorist attacks on Uzbek territory continued intermittently until 2005. These featured a serious terrorist organization, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which has been implicated in the February 1999 Tashkent bombings and orchestrated incursions into Kyrgyz and Uzbek territory over the following two years. Yet since 2005, there have been no instances of terrorism in Uzbekistan, and Uzbek authorities – who previously used relatively alarmist rhetoric on the problem of extremism – gradually developed more confidence, and considered the problem to be under control. Similarly, in Tajikistan, the government gradually asserted control over its territory following a debilitating civil war. Isolated instances of extremism have been reported, but the country is generally speaking much less affected by the problem than it was a decade ago.

Kazakhstan's experience is the opposite: it experienced no serious problem with extremism and terrorism in its first two decades of independence. But since 2011, Kazakhstan has been hit by a series of terrorist attacks, and authorities have reacted by adopting stricter laws regulating religious groups in the country, discussed in the next chapter. Moreover, while Kazakhstan has been hit by terrorist activity, the threat appears considerably more disparate and multifaceted than in Uzbekistan.

In 2011, several attacks rocked Kazakhstan. In May, the country experienced its first suicide bombing when an assailant set off a bomb in the Aktobe

headquarters of the security services, the KNB. A week later, a car exploded outside the KNB headquarters in Astana; later in the year, a gunman killed several people in the southern city of Taraz, and a bombing occurred in the western city of Atyrau. Authorities appear to have been taken by surprise, at first attributing these events to criminal activity – admitting only belatedly the likely connection to extremist groups. While the networks behind the 2011 attacks were dismantled, in 2016 the country again saw a spate of attacks, including a June shooting spree in Aktobe that left two dozen killed. Both the 2011 and 2016 attacks occurred during periods of economic troubles – following the 2008 financial crisis and the 2014 oil price collapse, respectively.

Research has shown that the rise of extremism in Kazakhstan dates back to the early 2000s, and to the role of individual Kazakhstani citizens in jihadi groups operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Islamic Jihad Union, an offshoot of the IMU, appears to have played a key role in this regard. Indeed, within the IMU a dispute erupted soon after the September 11, 2001, attacks. While the leadership of the organization pledged loyalty to the Taliban and Mullah Omar, and focused its operations entirely on the conflict in Afghanistan, at the expense of their erstwhile focus on Central Asia. Elements of the organization disagreed, and sought to maintain a focus on Central Asia – leading to the split and the creation of the IJU.⁹⁷ While the IJU expanded to include ethnic Turks and Europeans, and to target U.S. military installations in Germany, its main focus was on Central Asia. As Erlan Karim details, the IJU in 2002 dispatched two experienced operatives to develop its presence in Central Asia, focused on setting up networks in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, respectively.⁹⁸ They were initially based in Taraz, in southern Kazakhstan and near the border with Uzbekistan. While

⁹⁷ Jacob Zenn, "On the Eve of 2014: Islamism in Central Asia", *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, vol. 15, 201, p. 73.

⁹⁸ Yerlan Karim, *The Soldiers of the Caliphate: The Anatomy of a Terrorist Group*, Astana: KazISS, 2016, p. 68.

the IJU remained focused primarily on Uzbekistan and on the overthrow of President Islam Karimov there, it must be noted that the Central Asian jihadi groups explicitly denounce the national boundaries in the region and the separate identities of the individual republics. They likely chose Kazakhstan because it was a more liberal and permissive environment than Uzbekistan; and enabled the recruitment of both ethnic Kazakhs and Uzbeks residing in southern Kazakhstan. Subsequently, they managed to set up cells also in Shymkent and Semey (Semipalatinsk) in northeast Kazakhstan.

The IJU network was responsible for a spree of suicide bombings in Tashkent in 2004, that among other targeted the U.S. and Israeli embassies.⁹⁹ While these attacks failed to rock the government of Uzbekistan, they did lead to significant loss of life. Moreover, they rapidly led to a temporary deterioration of relations between Tashkent and Astana, as Uzbek investigators came to discover the Shymkent cell of the IJU and its involvement in planning the operation, and some voices in Tashkent felt their Kazakh counterparts did not take the terrorist threat seriously enough. Kazakh officials nevertheless succeeded in rapidly rounding up the IJU cells, including its leader, Zhakshybek Biymurzayev.¹⁰⁰ Subsequently, the IJU involvement in a plot against U.S. forces in Germany would gain it global notoriety and lead U.S. forces to target its bases in northern Afghanistan with drones.

In June 2016, a group of gunmen carried out several attacks in Aktobe. During this attack, a group of men entered a weapons store, killed the shop owner and security guard, and stole 17 weapons. They then stole a police car and bus, which was used to ram into the gates of a National Guard

⁹⁹ Guido Steinberg, *German Jihad: On the Internationalization of Islamist Terrorism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2013, p. 85-89.

¹⁰⁰ Karin, *The Soldiers of the Caliphate*, p. 80.

base.¹⁰¹ The next day, another attack at a security checkpoint near Aktobe followed, and in July an attack on law enforcement officers in Almaty. Thus, the conclusion is inescapable that in recent years, Kazakhstan has been subjected to a higher degree of terrorist attacks than its neighbors. In a statement given three days after the Aktobe attack, President Nazarbayev stated that “the terrorist act was organized by adherents of radical pseudo-religious movements, who received instructions from abroad.”¹⁰² He accused these “extremists” of “using the liberal character of state policy and laws” to create conflict and test the government’s strength and warned about colored revolutions that would lead to the fall of the government and instability.¹⁰³ Nazarbayev’s comments, and in particular his mention of the “liberal” nature of the state, may be indicative of a feeling among leading circles in Kazakhstan that unlike neighboring Uzbekistan, the state may have been too lenient in its attitude to extremism; and that Uzbekistan’s record shows that it is possible to effectively control extremist groups. The reorganization of the state that followed the 2016 attacks may be an indication of this thinking.

Among the countries of Central Asia, Kazakhstan sent comparably fewer fighters to the war in Syria. Estimates of the numbers of Central Asian fighters in Syria vary widely, and have ranged from ca. 1,500 to 4,000.¹⁰⁴ The number of Central Asians in Syria appears to be relatively low in

¹⁰¹ “17 chelovek pogibli v khode perestrelki v Aktobe,” TengriNews.kz. June 6, 2016. Accessed on October 02, 2017. https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/17-chelovek-pogibli-v-hode-perestrelki-v-aktobe-295928/

¹⁰² “Sayavleniye glavy gosudarstva,” *Official Site of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan*. June, 8, 2016. (http://www.akorda.kz/ru/events/akorda_news/zayavlenie-glavy-gosudarstva) Original Russian: “По имеющимся данным, террористический акт организован приверженцами радикальных псевдорелигиозных течений, инструкции они получили из-за рубежа.”

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ International Crisis Group, “Syria Calling: Radicalisation in Central Asia”, International Crisis Group, Briefing no. 72, January 20, 2015. (<https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/central-asia/syria-calling-radicalisation-central-asia>) John Heathershaw and David Montgomery, “Who Says Syria’s Calling? Why It is Sometimes Better to Admit we Just Don’t Know”, Cedar Network, February 17, 2015. (<http://www.cedarnetwork.org/2015/02/17/who-says-syrias-calling-why-it-is-sometimes-better-to-admit-that-we-just-do-not-know-by-john-heathershaw-and-david-w-montgomery/>)

international comparison. While there is considerable variation in figures cited, it is believed that of a rough estimate of 5,000 former Soviet citizens, 2,500 Russian citizens were in the conflict zone at its height; the rest are divided among the five Central Asian states, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. The best estimates suggest that about 500 Uzbekistani citizens have traveled to Syria, along with up to 600 Kyrgyzstani nationals (including ethnic Uzbeks from southern Kyrgyzstan), a similar number of Tajikistani nationals, and up to 300 Kazakhstani citizens. Much controversy surrounds these numbers, not least because Central Asians networks are identified mainly by the language they use – typically Russian or Uzbek – rather than by nationality. Given that the large contingent of Uyghurs from China’s Xinjiang province speak a language closely resembling Uzbek, and the overlap between Central Asian and North Caucasus fighters, statistics are difficult to come by.

Estimates of Kazakhstan’s contribution range as high as 400 fighters.¹⁰⁵ The phenomenon received attention in Kazakhstan particularly as it emerged that numerous families including elderly and children had relocated to the war zone, and that ISIS was showcasing Kazakh children in propaganda videos.¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, these numbers should be put in context: the largest contingents of foreign fighters appeared to come from Tunisia (up to 6,000), Saudi Arabia (2,500), Turkey (2,000-3,000), and Jordan (2,000). Beyond these Middle Eastern states, European nations were prominently represented: 1,700 French citizens, along with 700 Germans and a similar number of

¹⁰⁵ Efraim Benmelech and Esteban F. Klor, “What Explains the Flow of Foreign Fighters to ISIS?” *National Bureau of Economics Research*, April 2016. (<http://www.nber.org/papers/w22190.pdf>), p. 16.

¹⁰⁶ Noah Tucker, “Public and State Responses to ISIS Messaging: Kazakhstan”, CERIA Brief, no. 13, February 2016; Navroz Singh, “Isis and Radicalization in the Central Asian Republics,” Vivekananda Foundation Occasional Paper, October 2016. (http://www.vifindia.org/sites/default/files/isis-and-radicalization-in-the-central-asian-republics_0.pdf), p. 9.

Britons, as well as up to 500 Belgians and 300 Swedes.¹⁰⁷ Thus, Kazakhstan's foreign fighter problem appears considerably more limited than in most West European countries, let alone Russia: of 65 countries analyzed in a NBER study, Kazakhstan ranked 24th in foreign fighters travelling to Syria relative to its population – behind Sweden, Belgium and France. If ranked on the basis of the Muslim population only, Kazakhstan ranks 42nd.¹⁰⁸

While it is indisputable that young Central Asians, including Kazakhs, are being recruited to the killing fields of Syria, an important question is where that recruitment actually takes place. Indeed, the assumption that they are recruited in their homelands – and that Central Asia is a breeding ground of extremism¹⁰⁹ – is largely not borne out in fact. Quite to the contrary, the lion share of recruits are radicalized and recruited while working as migrant workers in Russia.¹¹⁰ In fact, Leon Aron estimates that between 80 and 90 percent of ISIL fighters from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan were recruited while labor migrants in Russia.¹¹¹ As the independent Russian newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* concluded, “the road to ISIS goes through Moscow.”¹¹² Given that Kazakhstan is primarily a destination country for

¹⁰⁷ The Soufan Group, *Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq*, December 2015. (http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf)

¹⁰⁸ Benmelech and Klor, “What Explains the Flow...”, p. 27-29.

¹⁰⁹ International Crisis Group, *Syria Calling*, Europe & Central Asia Briefing, no. 72, January 2015.

¹¹⁰ Joanna Paraszczuk, “Most Uzbeks Fighting for IS Came from Russia, Theologian Claims”, *RFE/RL*, March 24, 2015; (<http://www.rferl.org/content/most-uzbeks-fighting-for-is-came-from-russia-theologian-claims/26918165.html>) Noah Tucker, “Central Asian Involvement in the Conflict in Syria and Iraq: Drivers and Responses”, USAID and MDI, 2015.

(https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/CVE_CentralAsiansSyriaIraq.pdf); Ryskeldi Satke and Marta Ter, “Are Central Asian migrants in Russia a recruiting ground for Islamic State?” European Council on Foreign Relations, July 27, 2015.

(http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_are_central_asian_migrants_in_russia_3080); Daniil Turovsky, “How Isis is recruiting migrant workers in Moscow to join the fighting in Syria”, *Guardian*, May 5, 2015. (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/05/isis-russia-syria-islamic-extremism>);

¹¹¹ Leon Aron, “The Coming of the Russian Jihad, Part I”, *War on the Rocks*, September 23, 2016. (<https://warontherocks.com/2016/09/the-coming-of-the-russian-jihad-part-i/>)

¹¹² Zinaida Burskaya, “Doroga v IGIL Prolegla Cherez Moskvu”, *Novaya Gazeta*, January 18, 2016. (<https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2016/01/18/67080-doroga-v-igil-prolegla-cherez-moskvu>)

labor migration and not an origin country, Kazakhstan has been spared this particular aspect of the problem of foreign fighters. On the other hand, research in Kazakhstan suggests a strong link between extremist groups and criminal behavior. The country's General Prosecutor's office has warned of a growing connection between organized crime and "non-traditional" religious groups; researcher Serik Beissembayev's profile of 14 convicted or killed extremists in the country shows past involvement in crime is the only factor shared among all of the individuals he studied.¹¹³

In sum, Kazakhstan appears to suffer from a problem of extremism that is connected to, and interacts with, three conflict zones: the North Caucasus, the Afghanistan-Pakistan area, and the Syria-Iraq war zone. Closer study of extremism in Kazakhstan indicates that the original post-Soviet extremist influences were connected to the North Caucasus. Subsequently, through the role of Central Asian groups in the Afghanistan-Pakistan theater, some Kazakhs were recruited into terrorist organizations based there and in turn sought to beam their ideology back to Kazakhstan and develop new recruits. In fact, radicalized Kazakhs continue to be blamed for militant operations as far as Pakistan.¹¹⁴ Finally, a limited number of Kazakhs traveled to Syria, and it remains unclear at this point whether these individuals will be able to return to Kazakhstan and expand the extremist networks in the country.

¹¹³ Serik Beissembayev, "Religious Extremism in Kazakhstan: From Criminal Networks to Jihad", Central Asia Fellowship Papers, No. 15, February 2016. (<https://app.box.com/s/wnrak593fryxul39zqtb4mok3x2nnfxw>)

¹¹⁴ "Pakistan Says Dead Militants Had Kazakh Passports." *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*. Accessed November 17, 2017. <https://www.rferl.org/a/1059994.html>.

Secularism in Kazakhstan: Policies, Laws and Institutions

What is Kazakhstan's model of regulating religion? This section will clarify the policies, laws, and institutions that are at the heart of defining relations between the state and religion in Kazakhstan.

What is Kazakhstani Secularism?

Kazakhstan's model of secularism draws on aspects of the country's pre-Soviet heritage, the Soviet atheist period, as well as the arduous process of nation building in the wake of the Soviet institutional and ideological collapse. Indeed, it would be a mistake to view Astana's policies in the field of religion as merely a holdover from an earlier era or a reaction to the end of the USSR. Kazakhstani policy makers proactively sought to build a modern state which can hold its own in the community of nations. In doing so, they were able to draw on the often-difficult experiences of other states in the creation of modern states. Far from being complete, this process is ongoing, with new challenges being faced as the state continues in its forward trajectory.

As noted initially, from a western perspective the roots of secular statehood can be traced back to the major political movements of the late eighteenth century, specifically the American and French revolutions. The upheavals of this time period began to enshrine the relatively new idea of a separation between religion and politics into law. In the case of the "State Neutrality" model of the nascent United States, the separation of church and state was envisioned as a way to protect religious practices from government intervention, as well as the spiritual practices of minorities from

persecution. In the case of the “Skeptical/Insulting” model, however, the chief purpose was to protect the state from the intervention of the Church and religious bodies. As discussed initially, the difference in approach between these two models gives rise to important distinctions, most obvious in comparing the American practice of secularism and the French conception of laicism.

The framers of Kazakhstan’s constitution had the benefit of two hundred more years of human and institutional error to draw upon than their French and American counterparts. Yet regional considerations also informed political decisions in Kazakhstan. As the 1993 constitution was coming into being, the country’s immediate neighborhood did not yield many good options for the nascent state to model itself on. Tajikistan descended into a civil war which left former communist elites desperately clinging to power in the face of a violent and increasingly Islamist-flavored opposition movement. Meanwhile, various Islamist factions were pitted in a vicious civil war in Afghanistan. Although the Taliban movement had not yet come into existence, the levels of religious violence and turmoil in Afghanistan and Pakistan further reduced the appeal of Islamist politics. And while Saudi Arabia and Iran seemed to view the newly independent states of Central Asia as potential beneficiaries of petro-carbon largesse, the newly minted Kazakh state was highly skeptical to ideological imports from these regions. Only Turkey, which maintained a secular form of government and was closely integrated with the West, appeared to offer valuable insights for Central Asian leaders. But even there, the arrival to power of Islamist Necmettin Erbakan in 1996 clouded matters. Indeed, speaking in Ankara in March 1997 during the standoff between the Erbakan government and the secular state authorities, Kazakhstan’s Prime Minister even made a point to

emphasize his government's veneration for Kemal Atatürk and the secularism of the Turkish republic.¹¹⁵

Kazakhstan shares the secular nature of the state with the other four states of Central Asia. However, Kazakhstan's demographic realities were and are different than in the other Central Asian republics. The politically induced famine in the 1930s led to the death of over a third of the Kazakh nation.¹¹⁶ This, in turn, followed on widespread famine during the First World War, which was worsened by the brutal repression of the 1916 uprising against Russian attempts to coerce Kazakhs to join the war effort.¹¹⁷ As a result, the number of Kazakhs declined from over 3.6 million in the 1926 census to barely 2.3 million in 1939. Meanwhile, the ethnic Russian population doubled from 1.2 million to 2.4 million, reducing the Kazakhs to a minority in their own republic. To this was added the influx of close to a million Germans, Belarusians, Koreans and Chechens during the Second World War. Indeed, the Kazakh steppes became home to many nationalities during the course of the 20th century, mainly due to Stalin's policy of deportation of "suspect" national groups.¹¹⁸ In 1959, only 30 percent of the population consisted of ethnic Kazakhs. Only in 1989 did Kazakhs again outnumber Russians, and they reached a majority of the population only with the 1999 census.

Thus, upon independence, the Slavic portion of Kazakhstan population was much larger than in the neighboring states. This made the vision of the country as a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual society central to the state's understanding of itself. Efforts to entrench a post-Soviet national identity have focused on the civic national identity of being Kazakhstani

¹¹⁵ "Atatürk Ağamız", *Milliyet*, March 7, 1997, p. 16.

¹¹⁶ Sarah Cameron, "The Kazakh Famine of 1930-33: Current Research and New Directions", *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies*, vol. 3 no. 2, 2016.

¹¹⁷ Dennis Sokol, *The Revolt of 1916 in Russian Central Asia*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016 (second edition).

¹¹⁸ Robert Conquest, *The Soviet Deportation of Nationalities*, London: Macmillan, 1960.

(*Qazaqstandyq*), a major component of which includes the promotion of a society inherently tolerant of different ethnicities, languages, and religions not one's own. In this paradigm, secular governance features prominently as a force for social cohesion, serving to guarantee national prosperity and prevent communal rifts. Consequently, Kazakhstani officials and politicians, particularly President Nazarbayev himself, have promoted the ideas of a Kazakhstani nation and a secular state within the same conceptual framework.

Government Policy

The Kazakhstani leadership often touts Kazakhstan as a model for communities in which a plethora of religious and ethnic groups coexist peacefully. Many of President Nazarbayev's speeches, both aimed at domestic audiences and at the international community, tend to present Kazakhstan as a model of a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multilingual country. For example, in his address to the 17th session of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan, President Nazarbayev stated that "Kazakhstan is the only place in the world, where Muslims, Orthodox Christians, Catholics, Buddhists, and Jewish people live in harmony. This is the only place where they can meet and speak about all their problems. We created an ideal model of friendship and must protect it from outside threats."¹¹⁹

Nazarbayev's speeches stress that Kazakhstan is to be a place where all religions have equal rights and standing in the political and social spheres. To achieve this, the secularism of the state is advanced as an important guarantee of social cohesion and harmony. In the post-Soviet environment of Kazakhstan, this can be read as conveying a message of reassurance, built upon the uncertainty of the early post-independence era. Indeed, the government itself is presented as inclusive of all faiths and ethnicities – an

¹¹⁹ Nursultan Nazarbayev "Выступление Президента Республики Казахстан, Председателя Ассамблеи народа Казахстана Н.А.Назарбаева на XVII сессии АНК," 2011.

important indication of secular governance simultaneously maintaining order and allowing for active participation of minorities.

At another session of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan, the President proclaimed that the “secularity of the government is based on respect towards the great spiritual heritage of all religions practiced in Kazakhstan, on the freedom of choice of each one. This atmosphere of inter-confessional tolerance perhaps does not exist anywhere else in the world. At the same time, our government is secular and religion is separate from the government. We also absolutely reject extremism under religious slogans, attempts to politicize outside the religious teachings, and the imposing on our people by that which is religiously foreign.”¹²⁰

The government policy on religion thus takes its basis in the secular nature of the state. But as will be seen, this does not mean in practice a neutrality of the state toward religious communities, as in the State Neutrality model. Quite to the contrary, Kazakhstan has more closely approximated the Skeptical/Insulating model, drawing on the French and Turkish experience. Thus, the state takes upon itself to regulate religion. In fact, going one step further, the Kazakhstani model also differentiates between traditional and non-traditional religious communities, and government policies explicitly endorse and promote the traditional communities, while being less predisposed to the spread of non-traditional religious communities in the country. That, in turn, means Kazakhstan also borrows from the “Dominant Religion” model, though with the twist that it does not privilege one particular religion, as most examples of this model do, but the traditional religions at the expense of the foreign and novel interpretations. This, of course, is a direct result of the Soviet experience and the perceived need to restore traditional religions to their rightful place in society.

¹²⁰ Nursultan Nazarbayev, “Выступление Президента Республики Казахстан Н.А.Назарбаева на XXI сессии Ассамблеи народа Казахстана,” [Speech of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan N.A. Nazarbayev to the 21st session of the Assembly of Peoples of Kazakhstan.], April 18, 2014.

Constitution and Laws

Kazakhstan's Constitution contains clear and concise language regarding secularism and the country's perception of religion. Article I, Section I of the constitution, sets out to define the structure of the state. It declares that the "Republic of Kazakhstan proclaims itself a democratic, secular, legal and social state whose highest values are an individual, his life, rights and freedoms."¹²¹ Article I goes on to state that the highest functions of the government of Kazakhstan are to maintain stability and accord among its people. These two clauses appear in the first sentences of the constitution, and also occur consecutively, demonstrating that these underlying principles are permanently salient in the minds of those who operate the government.

In Article 5, the constitution recognizes the value of cultural and political diversity. Yet it also clearly prohibits the merging of public associations and state institutions in a theocratic manner. Article 5 also proscribes "public associations" that may serve to destabilize or sow discord within the Kazakhstani community, declaring illegal any institution that promotes violence for any purpose, including religious. In addition, political parties based on religion or funded by foreign religious leaders are barred from operating within the country. The last clause of Article 5 stipulates that all foreign religious influence in the country shall be undertaken in "coordination with respective state institutions," thus indicating the importance paid to the state's regulation of foreign religious influence.

This secularism of the state should not be taken to mean a stance on religion itself. Quite to the contrary, the constitution advocates religious freedom via its clause against discrimination in Article 14, which prohibits discrimination for "attitude toward religion." Article 19, similarly, provides all citizens with "the right to determine and indicate or not to indicate his

¹²¹ "Constitution of Kazakhstan", at <http://www.parlam.kz/en/constitution>.

national, party and religious affiliation.” Importantly, thus, these clauses are formulated so as to protect the right to religious freedom but also the right not to espouse any religion at all.

In addition to other freedoms regarding culture and the use of language, freedom of speech and the freedom to disseminate information are also protected by the Kazakh constitution, albeit with important exceptions. Propaganda advocating for violence, the destruction of the state, or superiority of one religion, class, or clan is explicitly prohibited by the constitution. The measures related to religion in the Kazakh constitution all seem to protect religious freedom while also protecting the state and people against any religious encroachment within the state or society. In other words, the constitution protects individual religious freedom, but also provides strong checks on any religious ideology that seeks to change the nature of the state. Indeed, any “religious party,” or group deemed to seek a “violent change of the constitutional system” or “inciting religious enmity” is explicitly prohibited. Not staying at that, Article 39 provides that “any actions capable of upsetting interethnic and interreligious concord shall be deemed unconstitutional.”

Thus, Kazakhstan’s constitution seeks to find a balance between the freedom of religion, on one hand, and the protection of state and society, on the other. In a comparative perspective, it appears clear that the constitution is philosophically aligned with the Skeptical/Insulating model, and less so with the State Neutrality model focused on the provision of individual religious freedom. Indeed, the constitution provides relatively broad guidelines to regulate and prohibit religiously-based organizations in society, as well as to regulate “foreign religious associations” – suggesting the concern of the constitution’s drafters with controlling the influence of religion and particularly religiously based ideologies on both the society and the state.

Certainly, this paradigm differs considerably from, for example, that of the United States, which gives American citizens the freedom to express their religion however they see fit. Kazakhstan's model provides more concrete regulations of religious expression and religious organizations. This is evident not only in the Constitution, but even more so from a closer look at Kazakhstan's penal code. The code contains multiple articles dictating punishments for disseminating or producing information calling for, or taking, "intentional actions directed to the institution of ... religious hatred, insult of the national honor or dignity or religious feelings of citizens, as well as propaganda of exclusivity, superiority or inferiority of citizens on grounds of their relation to religion, class, national, ancestral, or racial assignment."¹²² Similar rules apply to propaganda advocating for general cruelty and violence; the creation, management or participation in an extremist group; and propaganda advocating for the violation of the state's power or integrity.¹²³

The Kazakh penal code echoes the constitution in banning political parties or trade unions formed on the basis of a religion.¹²⁴ But whereas most provisions focus on proscribing groups spreading hatred or seeking a violent change in government, articles 404 and 405 go further: they include provisions that prohibit the formation of any "public association" that proclaims or implements religious intolerance or exclusiveness – and provide for concrete punishments for Kazakh citizen that participate in or organize activities of banned organizations. Thus, banned organizations are not limited to violent organizations, but include organizations the Kazakh government deems to be inciting exclusivity or intolerance. Clearly, the drafters of these provisions appear to have had purportedly non-violent

¹²² "Kazakhstan Penal Code": Adilet English and Russian Translations. Article 174. Note that the unofficial translation uses the term "generic" for the Kazakh *рулық* and Russian *родовой*, whose correct translation is closer to "ancestral," but used also to mean "clan-based" as well as "ethnic."

¹²³ *Ibid*, Articles 182, 183, 313

¹²⁴ Article 404.

extremist groups like Hizb-ut-Tahir in mind. While these laws only make passing references to religious organizations, the context of the code indicates that they were passed with the intention to strictly constrain the operation of such organizations with the aim of limiting the possibility of radicalization in society.

The penal code contains several articles particularly targeted at extremism, including providing for severe punishments – of up to fifteen years in prison – for leading or participating in the management of extremist groups. However, the penal code remains vague on defining extremism. Article 182, entitled “Creation, management of extremist group or participation in its activity”, does not define extremism; whereas article 183, which focuses on “permitting publication of extremist materials in the mass media” does so only indirectly by covering the following deeds: “fomentation of national, ethnic, racial, social and religious strife, promoting class exclusivity, war ... calls for forcible seizure of power, forcible retention of power, subversion of the security of the state or forcible change of the constitutional order, as well as violation of the territorial integrity of the Republic of Kazakhstan.”¹²⁵ In other words, the understanding of extremism is broad indeed.

Implicitly, the Kazakh penal code acknowledges the potential divisive role of religion by beginning the penal code in Article 15 by stating that criminal liability begins at 14 for inciting, “social, national, ethnic, racial, class or religious discord.”¹²⁶ Article 15 goes on to state that those accused of committing criminal infractions will be seen as equal under the law, independent of nationality, class, race, religion or social characteristics.¹²⁷ This secular equality desired by the Kazakh state is further emphasized in Article 145, which explains that it is a crime to violate the equality of another

¹²⁵ Authors’ translation, adapted from Adilet unofficial translation.

¹²⁶ Ibid, Article 15.

¹²⁷ Ibid, Article 15

citizen via, “direct or indirect restrictions of rights and freedoms of citizens on the grounds of property status, sex, race, nationality, language, attitude toward religion, beliefs, residence, or any membership of the citizen.”¹²⁸ These repeated references to secular equality within the penal code imply that the Kazakh state is willing to take exhaustive measures to ensure that no one group in society feels superior to others. This indicates that secularism is a central tenet within society, held at least in as high a regard as civil liberty and freedom of expression.

The Kazakhstan penal code contains 16 articles directly referencing religion, with an additional four articles focusing on extremism. Besides the articles discussed above, the other articles discussing religion in the penal code place special meaning on religious intent. For a multitude of crimes --from assault, to abuse of power, to the destruction of property -- the punishment or sentence of the crime is significantly increased in severity for crimes motivated by ethnic or religious hatred.¹²⁹ These articles directly reference such motivation as a justification for increasing the length of imprisonment or the amount of a fine. It can, therefore, be said that the Kazakh penal code more explicitly condemns religiously motivated crime, and more strictly regulates religious activity and religiously motivated actions than Western nations tend to do.

At the heart of Kazakhstani efforts to maintain a commitment to secular governance are a series of amendments and supplements that were enshrined into the country’s legal code in late 2011. Officially titled the “Law on Religious Activity and Religious Associations” and the “Law on introducing Amendments and Additions to several legal acts of Religious Activity and Religious Associations,” the two orders signed by President

¹²⁸ Ibid, Article 145

¹²⁹ Articles 106, 107, 110.

Nazarbayev were aimed at streamlining and updating the existing legal framework within which religious structures operate in the country.

In terms of content, the major novelty of the legislation revolved around the terms of registration for religious associations and groupings, as well as the opening of new places of worship and the dissemination of religious material. The constitutional provisions mentioned above, which limit the activities of foreign entities to operate in Kazakhstani territory, were upgraded: only citizens of the Republic of Kazakhstan are now permitted to register religious organizations with the authorities. Clergy and missionaries from abroad are still permitted to attend services within the country, but must be invited by an organization registered locally. The preamble of the law on religious practice specifically mentions the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence and Russian Orthodox Christianity as playing a significant “historical role” in the development of the country, the spiritual traditions of both having important figures based outside of the country. This enshrines into law the government policies that seek to promote traditional religions and resist the growth of “non-traditional” religious groups.

Keeping with the top-down organizing structure that is common in the post-Soviet space, spiritual groups wishing to register with the corresponding Ministry of Justice offices on the national, provincial or regional level are now required to have a minimum number of adult members. In practice, faith-based communities already established within Kazakhstan, notably those practicing Hanafi Islam and Russian Orthodox Christianity due to their historical predominance and large adherent bases, were able to convert their earlier registration status in line with the new legislation. Smaller or less established groups had to demonstrate a large enough practitioner base and apply for state recognition. As Kazakhstani law prohibits the creation of groups which promote anti-state activity, incite communal violence, coerce membership, lend themselves to financial impropriety or otherwise

operate in a manner which is contrary to the basic principles of Kazakhstani governance, registering authorities are required to examine new applicants for compliance, notably by the Agency of Religious Affairs (now Ministry of Religious Affairs and Civil Society). Established in 2011 through a reorganization of the Ministry of Culture, this Agency incorporated the Research and Analysis Center for Religious Issues of the Ministry of Justice, and today forms a part of the newly created Ministry of Religious Affairs. An example of a spiritual organization losing its status in the country following the new legislation is the Church of Scientology, whose small Almaty-based community failed to re-register in 2012.¹³⁰

New registration guidelines and provisions meant that in 2011 and 2012 spiritual and religious association needed to either newly register or re-register with updated material. This included registration on the local, regional and national level with no fewer than 50,500 or 5,000 members respectively. In practice, this forced some religious associations to shut their doors, while others had to realign their internal membership policies and practices. Failure to comply with the new regulation would result in mid-level fines and the closure of the association. Many smaller religious groups were obliged to join larger umbrella organizations. An illustrative example is provided by the Fatikha Mosque in Aktobe, which was closed by authorities in September 2013 due to the Imam's refusal to register with the Muslim Board of Kazakhstan.¹³¹

The updated law on religion also focuses on controlling the dissemination of spiritual literature and material. According to the letter of the law, the

¹³⁰ "The Church of Scientology did not Pass the Registration in Kazakhstan", Bnews.kz, October 26, 2012.

(https://bnews.kz/en/news/obshchestvo/the_church_of_scientology_did_not_pass_the_registration_in_kazakhstan)

¹³¹ Yevgeniy Zhovtis, "Analysis of Trends in Legal Regulation of the Right to Free Conscience, Religion, and Belief in the Republic of Kazakhstan", in A. Alisheva, ed., *Freedom of Religion and Belief in Central Asia: Trends and Challenges*, Bishkek: Human Rights of the Believer Central Asian Forum, 2015, p. 13. (<http://www.osce.org/odihr/187521?download=true>)

distribution of religious books, texts, and pamphlets is only permitted within places of worship or other specially designated physical areas. Given the rise of the circulation of material through the increased penetration of mass communication technology and social media platforms, the availability and breadth of materials available to the population at large has significantly increased, and as such it is no surprise that contemporary jurisprudence would seek to strike a balance between approved and potentially harmful discussions of religious practice. Any religious association wishing to distribute literature pursuant to its activities must first submit it to the Agency on Religious Affairs. Similarly, any material with a religious dimension originating outside the country must first pass the Agency's inspection and expert analysis. An example of a material failing to pass muster was the 2012 video "The Innocence of Muslims," widely viewed as inflammatory and designed to be offensive to Muslims. The Agency of Religious Affairs reviewed the film and found it to be an extremist film aiming to incite religious hatred.¹³²

A further provision of the new legal code provides new restrictions on places of worship or spiritual practice. Any spiritual association wishing to establish a center for prayer, community activity or study must register with the local authorities. Should a registered group wish to change an existing site, or open a new one to accommodate its constituents, it must first appeal to the local authorities for permission. In theory, the three-tiered system of registration for religious bodies provides guidelines for the space requirements of religious communities. At the same time, the practice of religious activity under the auspices of a religious group in private residences is prohibited. A further provision of the new legislation, and one

¹³² "Kazakhstan Agency for Religious Affairs is Checking 3,000 Religious Materials", Tengrinews.kz, September 27, 2012. (<https://en.tengrinews.kz/religion/Kazakhstan-Agency-for-Religious-Affairs-is-checking-3000-13302/>)

area which produced pushback in the Kazakhstani parliament, was a prohibition of official prayer spaces in government buildings.

Coming on the heels of the 2011 Aktobe terrorist attack, the new legislation on religious regulation was motivated by a desire to lay the foundation for both law enforcement and administrative practice. The terrorist attacks led to a jarring awakening that solicited a rapid response by the authorities in an effort to prevent an escalation of violence and safeguard state secularism from potential challenges. A mere six months passed between the attack in May and the signing into law of the 2011 reforms, and this haste led to ambiguities in the new laws, a fact that was subjected to criticism. That being said, it would be a mistake to view these reforms as the terminal point of Kazakhstan's judicial path, nor would it be accurate to characterize the presidential orders that formed the basis of the new laws as merely reactive. Indeed, the reforms built upon the established administrative framework and served to direct the tide of Kazakhstan's civil society debate, laying the groundwork for later regulatory and state bodies, such as the Ministry for Religious Affairs and Civil Society which would come into being five years later.

In 2018, further amendments were passed to the Law on Religion. These amendments limited the ability of minors to attend religious services without parental permission, and tightened restriction on obtaining religious education abroad. They also imposed new restrictions on public display of "attributes and outward signs" of what the government terms "destructive religious movements," defined as groups that "threaten people's rights and freedoms." Comments by authorities indicated that the main target of these amendments were what the government termed "pseudo-Salafi" groups.¹³³

¹³³ Svetlana Glushkova and Farangis Najibullah, "Kazakhstan Targets Beards, Pants In Fight Against 'Destructive Religious Movements'", RFE/RL, February 4, 2018. (<https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-targets-islamist-beards-pants-destructive-movements/29017566.html>)

State Institutions

Kazakhstan has developed a series of state and non-state institutions in charge of religious affairs. An official religious body, the Muftiate, emerged shortly after independence. It took much longer for a dedicated Ministry to be created, twenty-five years after the Soviet Union's collapse. Meanwhile, the state has also employed the Committee for National Security to address religious issues deemed problematic to the state. On the positive side, the government has launched an international process termed the Congress of World and Traditional religions to promote inter-religious dialogue globally.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs

Kazakhstan's Ministry of Religious and Civil Society Affairs was created in September 2016 to serve as the government's newfound organ by which to interact with the broader religious community and civil society to mitigate radicalization and extremism. The newly appointed Minister, Nurlan Yermekbaev, explained in November 2016 that the Ministry's creation was prompted by the terrorist attack in Aktobe in June that year. Accordingly, the Ministry was created to "strengthen our determination to preserve the secular nature of our country and its religious moderation while protecting the rights of religious believers and preventing and countering extremism through well-thought-through and balanced policies."¹³⁴ According to the minister, youth represent both the solution and primary target for extremist organizations operating in the region: propaganda distributed via social media, high youth unemployment, and a sense of isolation from the larger culture and community all contribute to radicalization.¹³⁵ The Ministry was created to mitigate such disenfranchisement, and to coordinate government

¹³⁴ Nurlan Yermekbayev, "Why Kazakhstan Created the Ministry for Religious and Civil Society Affairs" *Diplomat*, November 10, 2016. (<https://thediplomat.com/2016/11/why-kazakhstan-created-the-ministry-for-religious-and-civil-society-affairs/>)

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

efforts to economically and socially reconnect the youth population to the larger, secular Kazakh culture. By fostering a sense of belonging across the country by promoting civil societies, the ministry hopes to curb this disillusionment, in turn curbing radicalization.

To this end, the ministry strives to inform and educate Kazakh youth while facilitating the growth of civil society in these subcultures. The Department of Youth Policy within the ministry attempts to accomplish this task, coordinating efforts amongst all government branches aimed at promoting youth engagement in Kazakh culture. On a more regional level, the ministry has set up so-called Councils of youth across the country to help implement these programs at a local level. However, from Astana's perspective, such educational efforts to encourage youth employment and social participation must be supplemented by fostering a vibrant civil society. The government will continue support NGOs via previously existing grant programs, but feels that further support is necessary. Thus, an important aspect of the ministry's role is to collaborate with larger international bodies like the UN and OSCE to develop a proper and robust legal framework to facilitate NGO efforts.

Yermekbaev's perspective on the role of the Ministry appears to be informed by his background. In 1986, the future minister graduated from the USSR Defense Ministry's Red Banner Military Institute's Department of Oriental Languages, and completed his economic studies from the Kazakh State Academy of Architecture and Construction in 1996. In addition to speaking fluent Russian, Chinese, English and Portuguese, according to his biography from the Kazakh government's website, Yermekbaev holds a PhD in political science as well. Among other, he then served as head of the Presidential Administration's Foreign Policy Center and as Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs before becoming an assistant to the President until 2012.

Yermekbaev then was appointed Ambassador to China and Vietnam before being appointed as Secretary of Kazakhstan's Security Council in 2014.¹³⁶

Organizationally, the Ministry is comprised of the Committees for Religious Affairs and for Civil Society Affairs, and divided into seven distinct sections: the Department of Youth Policy, the Department of Analysis and Strategic Planning, an Administrative department, a Department of Finance and Economics, a legal Department, and Internal Audit Management Department, and the Kazakh state-wide HR department.

The Muftiate

The Kazakhstani Muftiate, officially the Spiritual Board of the Muslims of Kazakhstan (DUM-K from the Russian “Духовное управление мусульман Казахстана”), is the official religious body endorsed by the Kazakhstani government. Historically the term Muftiate refers to a territorial administrative entity structured around the clergy, perhaps comparable to a diocese or bishopric in Christianity, but in the successor states of the Soviet Union this has come to mean an official board which ties the clergy to the state. Headed by a mufti, the organization works to coordinate religious practice with the state and is charged with training Islamic clergy in Kazakhstan.

The Muftiate rests on Hanafi Islam, which, as noted, is the only form of Islamic worship endorsed by the Kazakhstani government. When the President and other state officials speak of Kazakhstani Islam and its historical development, it is the type of Islam that is said to be “traditionally” practiced by Kazakh nomads. Since 2006, Kazakhstani law acknowledged the role of Hanafi Sunni Islam, alongside the Orthodox

¹³⁶ Official biography available at:

https://primeminister.kz/enpage/view/ministr_po_delam_religii_i_grazhdanskogo_obshchestva_ermekbaev_nurlan_baiuzakovich

Christianity of the ethnic Russian community, in the spiritual life of the country.

The Muftiate of Kazakhstan was established as an independent entity in 1990 after it separated from the SADUM of Central Asia.¹³⁷ This constituted the first time that Kazakhs had been in charge of their own religious institutions: before the Soviet period, Islamic institutions had been dominated by ethnic Tatars from the Orenburg muftiate. While these institutions were thoroughly destroyed in the first two decades of Soviet rule, a thaw in the 1940s – very much linked to the need to appease Muslims in a time of crisis for the USSR – led to the establishment of the SADUM in 1943. This institution, as discussed in the previous chapter, was based in Tashkent and dominated by ethnic Uzbeks.¹³⁸ As noted, this institution was strongly anti-Sufi in character.¹³⁹

The first Mufti of Kazakhstan was Qazi Ratbek Nysanbaiuly, who also represented Kazakhstan in Tashkent at the Muftiate of Central Asia before the split. He was thus a product of the Soviet bureaucracy. Nysanbaiuly served until 2000, when he was replaced by former diplomat and Arabist Absattar Derbisali. Derbisali closely followed the line of the political leadership, and went so far as to call on Kazakh women to refrain from wearing the hijab: “Kazakhs have beautiful national clothes, but it is not hijab. We should not wear Afghanistan’s national clothes. Our people, our women have to dress according to traditions of our ethnicity.”¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Shahram Akbarzadeh, “Islamic clerical establishment in Central Asia,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 20 no. 2, 1997, p. 88.

¹³⁸ Galina M. Yemelianova, “Islam, National Identity, and Politics in Contemporary Kazakhstan,” *Asian Ethnicity*, vol. 15 no. 3, 2014, p. 286-301.

¹³⁹ Eren Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia, 1943-1991*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 153-160.

¹⁴⁰ “Supreme Mufti called Kazakhstan women to not wear hijabs,” Tengrinews, November 18, 2011. (<https://en.tengrinews.kz/religion/Supreme-Mufti-called-Kazakhstan-women-to-not-wear-hijabs-5680/>) In this, Bedrisali’s stance was similar to the former Chair of Turkey’s Directorate for Religious Affairs, Ali Bardakoğlu, who similarly counseled that the headscarf was not a requirement under Islam.

Derbisali, however, lacked strong theological credentials, being an Arabist rather than an Islamic theologian. In 2013, he returned to academia, and was replaced by Yerzhan Malgazhyuly Mayamerov, a graduate of the Department of Shar'ia and Law at Al-Azhar Islamic University in Cairo, where he also worked at the Fatwas Adoption Department for two years. Soon after Mayamerov's appointment, the Muftiate began issuing *Fatwas* on the basis of Hanafi jurisprudence. Mayamerov has since departed from his predecessor's stances, for example advocating women wearing hijabs in public spaces. He has also called for a lifting of the ban on Islamic prayer rooms in public spaces, which further signals a change in response of the Mufti towards what is "traditional" Islam that exists in Kazakh society.¹⁴¹ On December 8, 2017, Serikbay Oraz – also a graduate of Al-Azhar – became the new Mufti of Kazakhstan. Oraz, who held positions as rector of the Islamic Institute and as Imam of Astana, also studied at Nur-Mubarak university, and has secular degrees in management and economics.¹⁴²

The Muftiate has some degree of control over the education of students of Islam. Kazakhstani students of religion must attain permission from the board to study at an Islamic institution abroad. In an interview, the Mufti Mayamerov stated that

There are young people, who enrolled in foreign religious educational institutions without the permission of the DUMK. It's known that when young people without fundamental theological knowledge with an unformed religious world view and that fall under the influence of religious prescriptions of other countries have begun to spread opposing views and commentary on the specific

"Müslümanlığın ön şartı değil," Sabah, November 11, 2010; "Başörtüsü siyasilerin işi' dedi, gitti," Radikal, November 11, 2010, http://www.radikal.com.tr/turkiye/basortusu_siyasilerin_isi_dedi_gitti-1028533.

¹⁴¹ Yemelianova, "Islam, National Identity, and Politics...", p. 294.

¹⁴² "New Supreme Mufti of Kazakhstan Elected", *inform.kz*, December 8, 2017.

(https://www.inform.kz/en/new-supreme-mufti-of-kazakhstan-elected_a3094713)

religious questions in our country. Currently the issue is under control, and in accordance with bilateral agreements between us and foreign countries, we monitor and do explanatory work with our students.¹⁴³

Indeed, the education of young Muslim Kazakhstanis is one of the largest preoccupations of the Mufti, with the DUMK directing young people to study in certain institutions and only a select number of Muslim countries.¹⁴⁴

Of course, the Mufti's background at Al-Azhar raises important questions. Given that Kazakhstan's political leadership is highly secularized and relatively ill-informed about Islamic matters, it is doubtful whether the state institutions currently possess the capability to ensure that the Muftiate continues to develop along the Hanafi lines desired by the President. By analogy, the Turkish Directorate for Religious Affairs – created during the Kemalist era for similar purposes – is also supposed to ensure that the country's mosques and imams adhere to Hanafi jurisprudence and are shielded from alien and radical ideologies. But as Turkish scholar Hilmi Demir has shown, even in Turkey Salafi tendencies have come to exert a growing influence, by stealth, on official Turkish religious institutions.¹⁴⁵ Is something similar likely to happen in Kazakhstan? It remains too early to say. However, the experience of successive Muftis at Al-Azhar would necessarily have been influenced by the stricter Shafi'i and Maliki schools of jurisprudence that dominate there. Moreover, Al-Azhar is likely to

¹⁴³ Supreme Mufti, "Verkhovny Muftij: Religiya stanovitsya neobkhdimym i, bezuslovno, pozitivnym faktorom razvitiya gosudarstva," Official site of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan, February 04, 2016. <http://muftyat.kz/ru/article/1790>.

¹⁴⁴ Supreme Mufti, "Idti v nogu so vremenyem," Official site of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan, February 16, 2016. <http://muftyat.kz/ru/article/1809>

¹⁴⁵ Hilmi Demir, "Diyanet Camisinde Selefi Vehhabi Propaganda", *Türk Ocakları*, May 4, 2015. (<https://www.turkocaklari.org.tr/yazar/hilmi-demir/diyanet-camisinde-selefi-vehhabi-propaganda-5209>) Demir, "Nakşibendilik sefileşiyor mu?", *21 Yüzyıl Türkiye Enstitüsü*, September 17, 2014, (<http://www.21yyte.org/tr/arastirma/teostrateji-arastirmalari-merkezi/2014/09/17/7764/naksibendilik-sefileşiyor-mu>)

perpetuate the same hostility to esoteric Sufi currents that dominated the official religious authorities in Central Asia in Soviet times.¹⁴⁶ This in itself provides a dilemma for the government, which characterizes both Hanafi Islam and the Folk Islam of Kazakh traditions as “traditional.” Yet the government’s policies do not account for the possibility of a conflict among these. The official Hanafi authorities are likely to develop in an increasingly literalist direction, if nothing else as a requirement for issuing *Fatwas* on varieties of subjects. These *Fatwas* are based on Shari’a, which requires making references to a scriptural interpretation, rather than simply accepting the Folk practices of the Kazakhs as Islamic. Yet such literalism stands in direct conflict with the esoteric folk Islam: among Sufi orders only the Naqshbandis are thoroughly comfortable with Shari’a. This matter will certainly be one to watch over coming years, and may require attention by the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

The National Security Committee

Tasked with combating violent extremism and other challenges to the coherence of the state, the National Security Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan, usually referred to by the Russian acronym KNB, is the successor organization to the Soviet era KGB. Formed in 1992, the Kazakh daughter organization initially functioned much like its predecessor. Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York and the ensuing War on Terror, however, the KNB significantly increased its counter-terrorism capacity building efforts. This process involved raising the organization’s capacity to deal with interrelated issues of domestic radicalization, instigation of communal violence and foreign support for extremist ideologies.

¹⁴⁶ Yemelianova *Russia and Islam*, p. 9.

In order to meet the threat of violent extremism, Astana moved to create the Anti-Terrorism Center in 2004. Charged with the “coordination of counterterrorist and counter-extremist activities of various state bodies,”¹⁴⁷ the Anti-Terrorism Center operates under the auspices of the KNB and forms a core part of the evolving Kazakhstani efforts to tackle the issue of non-state violence. The founding of the center as a distinct counter-terror entity coincided with the Second Program for Combatting Terrorism, Extremism and Separatism running from 2004 to 2006. Over the past decade the KNB has also incorporated and updated information age practices, including monitoring traffic of illegal material via the internet and electronic storage through the Government Communication Service, as well as the Border Control Service.¹⁴⁸

As legislation and practice have become more refined over time, the KNB’s involvement in countering religious extremism has increased. In 2008 the agency was instrumental in a total of 41 criminal cases that involved terrorist elements. As Kazakhstani efforts to safeguard the secularism of the state have progressed, the KNB involvement with law enforcement and administrative checks to anti-state activity has increased. Most recently, the Anti-Terror Center of the KNB is instrumental in liaising with the newly created Ministry of Religious Affairs and Civil Society as part of the most recent drive to further streamline counter extremism through the “State Program to Counter Religious Extremism and Terrorism in Kazakhstan for 2017-2020.” The Previous program focused on uncovering and preventing illegal places of worship, the distribution of illegal religious literature, and illegal missionary activity, along with training of adults and children on religious extremism. It also called for the creation of more “anti-sect” centers.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ Mariya Omelicheva, *Counterterrorism Policies in Central Asia*, London: Routledge, p. 121.

¹⁴⁸<http://www.knb.kz/en/article/structure>

¹⁴⁹ U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, “2017 Annual Report: Kazakhstan,” p. 2.

Indeed, the KNB has taken the lead in arresting individuals and groups deemed extremist. According to its own accounts, the KNB has successfully intervened to prevent over 60 terrorist attacks in the country in the past five years.¹⁵⁰ What has garnered the agency more negative publicity in the West is the fact that it has also infiltrated and subsequently prosecuted individuals considered by outside voices to be nonviolent and, in the terminology of the U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom, engaging merely in “peaceful religious activities.” These include members of, among other, Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Jamaat Tablighi, as well as individuals Salafis, and these individuals are typically prosecuted under the provision in Kazakhstan’s criminal code that prohibits propagandizing the superiority of one religion over another. In a number of cases, the KNB infiltrates these groups and captures audio from individuals that is subsequently used against them in court proceedings, leading several to be convicted to prison terms of up to five years.¹⁵¹

The KNB can thus be said to have taken the lead in monitoring, infiltrating and prosecuting with considerable zeal organizations deemed extremist in Kazakhstan. The agency’s profile in religious matters has clearly increased in recent years, a result of the growing concern in the government of religious extremism spreading out of control, as evidenced by terrorist attacks in 2011 and 2016. As is frequently the case in these matters, the controversy concerns mainly the definition of extremism, and how wide a dragnet should appropriately be used when seeking to prevent terrorism.

¹⁵⁰ Department of State, “Country Reports on Terrorism 2016 – Kazakhstan”, July 19, 2017.

¹⁵¹ U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, “2017 Annual Report: Kazakhstan,” p. 4. Felix Corley, “Kazakhstan: Five Years Jail, Three Year Ban”, *Forum 18 News Service*, May 3, 2017. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2277); Corley, “Kazakhstan: Now 30 Sunni Muslims Convicted Since December 2014, KNB Secret Spy”, *Forum 18 News Service*, April 22, 2016. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2170)

The Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions

Billed as a continuation of earlier inter-faith dialogues, specifically the ecumenical World Day of Prayer for Peace established in 1982 by Pope John Paul II, the Congress came into being under the auspices of the Nazarbayev government in 2003. Hosted in Astana on a tri-annual basis, the congress aims to bring together religious authorities and policy makers from across the world. The first congress set the goal to agree upon universal guidelines and establish a permanent international and interdenominational institute to promote religious dialogue and accept “coordinated decisions.”¹⁵² The Fifth Congress took place in 2015; the event has gradually grown in importance with membership rising from 23 participating entities in 2003 to more than 40 in 2015, bringing together several hundred delegates.

The Congress’s rhetorical focus has been on ecumenism and the promotion of inter-faith dialogue. However, the congresses have had a significant security dimension. The focus of the discussions in several congresses has centered on combating violent religious extremism and terrorism – with emphasis being placed on collaboration between religious and political leaders to curtail the threat of religious violence.

The very title of the Congress illustrates the clear purpose to unite traditional religious communities, and excludes non-traditional religious orientations seen as detrimental to social harmony. The Congress has attracted high-level participation including Heads of States and the UN Secretary-General. However, the U.S. and European states have yet to fully appreciate the present and potential role of the Congress.¹⁵³

¹⁵² <http://www.religions-congress.org/content/view/15/32/lang,english/>

¹⁵³ U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, “2017 Annual Report: Kazakhstan,” p. 1. (<http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Kazakhstan.2017.pdf>)

Education

State-sponsored education in Kazakhstan consists of preschool, primary, lower and upper secondary education, and post-secondary education. Primary and secondary education are compulsory and free of charge,¹⁵⁴ while tertiary education is subsidized by the state. Most schools are administered by the Ministry of Education and Science. On January 19, 2011, the Kazakhstani government passed a law, “On the status of ‘Nazarbayev University,’ ‘Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools’ and ‘Nazarbayev Fund’” “to introduce the modern forms of governance in education, to develop academic freedom and autonomy for the implementation of innovative educational programs and research projects.”¹⁵⁵ Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools (NIS) are considered to be the most prestigious secondary schools in Kazakhstan and supported by a state-funded non-profit company. These schools are used by the Kazakhstani government to develop and implement new pedagogical practices and approaches that can be adapted for the education system as a whole.¹⁵⁶

Importantly, Kazakhstan’s education system is thoroughly secular, implying that it is epistemologically based on reason and experience rather than divine revelation. In other words, Kazakhstan’s education system, unlike the case in much of the Muslim world, builds on the heritage of the Enlightenment. Moreover, Kazakhstan’s education system, while dilapidated after independence, is being reformed along European guidelines, including integrating the country with the Bologna process for tertiary education. Kazakhstan’s performance has also improved visibly in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which assesses

¹⁵⁴ OECD, *Reviews of National Policies for Education: Secondary Education in Kazakhstan* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2014), 30. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264205208-en>

¹⁵⁵ “History,” Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools, accessed September 22, 2017. <http://nis.edu.kz/en/about/history/>

¹⁵⁶ OECD, *Reviews of National Policies for Education: Secondary Education in Kazakhstan*, 34.

achievement and application of key knowledge and skills of 15-year old's in mathematics, reading, science, and problem-solving. While Kazakhstani students still place behind their counterparts from Europe, they are gradually moving closer to the OECD average, in particular in math and science.¹⁵⁷

Prior to 2016, secularism and religion were not subjects commonly taught in schools, rather, religion as an academic subject was taught in some schools as an elective course called "Foundations of Religious Studies."¹⁵⁸ However, in 2014 Order 281 by the Minister of Education and Science called for the creation of a course of "Secularism and Foundations of Religious Studies," which would become mandatory for ninth grade students. The course was introduced in Kazakhstani curricula as a compulsory subject in September 2016, and is taught in the ninth grade for one hour a week, making it thirty-four hours in the academic year.

Appendix A provides an outline of the course. According to the Ministry's order, the goals of this course are: 1) to bring the principle of secularism to students and teach it as an important factor of stability in the government and to teach them how to study and understand religion against the background of secularism; 2) to give comprehensive knowledge about freedom of conscience, history, and current state of world and traditional religions, as well as about new religious movements, destructive religious movements, and prohibited religious organizations; and 3) to teach students to not accept ideologies of extremism, terrorism, and religious radicalism

¹⁵⁷ See Svante E. Cornell and Johan Engvall, *Kazakhstan in Europe: Why Not?*, Stockholm and Washington: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Silk Road Paper, October 2017. (<http://silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13254-kazakhstan-in-europe-why-not?.html>)

¹⁵⁸ TengriNews, "Religiovedenie budut pryepodavat' v shkolakh Kazakhstana s 2016 goda" (tengrinews.kz, 2015) https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/religiovedenie-budut-prepodavat-shkolah-kazahstana-2016-goda-278146/

and to educate them a sense of tolerance and how to form a humanistic worldview on the basis of spiritual and moral values.¹⁵⁹

The new nation-wide class builds on a curriculum which includes a unit on the basic tenants of world religions, as well as the history of religion in Kazakhstan and the laws and principles of the government.¹⁶⁰ The course is intentionally aimed at teenage students, who are deemed more likely to be vulnerable to exploitative or alien religious practices. The stated goals of the legislation among other seeks to “give comprehensive knowledge about freedom of conscience, history, and current state of world and traditional religions, as well as about new religious movements, destructive religious movements, and prohibited religious organizations” as well as “teach students to not accept ideologies of extremism, terrorism, and religious radicalism and to educate them a sense of tolerance and how to form a humanistic worldview on the basis of spiritual and moral values.”¹⁶¹

Secularism in Evolution

Kazakhstan’s model of secularism is in evolution. Based philosophically on the laicist model promoted by France, it is also inspired by the secularist Turkish model of the twentieth century, and by its own specific national realities. Thus, Kazakhstan’s secularism does not hesitate to regulate religion, and to differentiate between religious communities. Given the Soviet experience, the state has adopted policies to endorse and support the revival of traditional religious communities; and to hinder competition from

¹⁵⁹ “On amending the order of the Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan of 3 April 2013 No. 113 ‘On the approval of standard curricula for general subjects, courses of choice, and optional courses for general education organizations’,” Astana: Republican Center of Legal Information of the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2014.

¹⁶⁰ “On amending the order of the Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan of 3 April 2013 No. 113 ‘On the approval of standard curricula for general subjects, courses of choice, and optional courses for general education organizations’,” Astana: Republican Center of Legal Information of the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2014.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

religious influences deemed alien and non-traditional. Borrowing terminology from the economic realm, Kazakhstan can be said to engage in religious protectionism: it deems its traditional religious institutions and communities to be vulnerable enough to warrant state protection, and rejects the notion of full religious freedom that, in the view of the state, provides an un-level playing field that benefits financially strong and assertive foreign religious movements.

Events in the past decade led Kazakhstani authorities to conclude that they had underestimated the threat posed by extremist religious groups. As a result, reforms in 2011, 2016 and 2018 led to the introduction of additional restrictions on religious groups. Naturally, these policies have led to state intervention against individuals and communities that authorities deem extremist or non-traditional, and these interventions have been accompanied by restrictive tendencies on the part of law enforcement authorities and security structures. This is one source of the substantial criticism that governmental as well as non-governmental international human rights bodies have directed against Kazakhstan.

However, importantly, this criticism is caused not only by the restrictive behavior of authorities, but on a philosophical disagreement: western advocates of religious freedom support full religious freedom and a state neutrality toward religion, with the only acceptable exception being in the case of groups engaging in violence or inciting violence. Kazakhstan's authorities operate on the basis of a fundamentally different principle: that it is the duty of the state to regulate religious affairs to ensure the revival of traditional religious communities, and to ensure stability and harmony in society. This divergence of views lies at the basis of the controversy surrounding Kazakhstan's religious policies, and cannot be easily bridged.

Implications and Conclusions

This study has sought to shed light on the model of secular governance embraced by the government of Kazakhstan. It has found that the Kazakhstani model is on the one hand clearly defined, but also a work in progress: it has undergone considerable changes over the quarter century of independence.

Unlike what is commonly assumed, the Kazakhstani model is not simply a “light” version of Soviet atheism motivated by anti-religious animus on the part of its leaders. Quite to the contrary, Kazakhstan’s commitment to secular governance predates the Soviet Union, and while it was never the subject of unanimity, it was strongly held by the national intelligentsia of Kazakhstan in the early twentieth century. Similarly today, there is an ongoing debate within the elite on the relationship between state and religion. Indeed, there are elements of the Kazakhstani leadership, including in key positions, who have publicly put forward ideas that would entail a much stronger religious component to public and official life. Nevertheless, the vast majority of the elite – and, by all accounts, of Kazakhstan’s population – treasure the secular character of the state and its cautious approach to foreign religious influences.

The relationship between state and religion in Kazakhstan bears similarities to the rest of Central Asia; yet it also presents important unique characteristics. To begin with, Kazakhstan’s society is considerably more multi-confessional than any other regional society. This is one factor in the leadership’s ironclad embrace of civic nationhood and secular – indeed, laicist – governance: maintaining a state identity based on citizenship and

not ethnicity is a *sine qua non* for the country's stability; and that in turn would be unthinkable without the maintenance of secular law and education, barring which large groups of the population would be relegated to second class citizens. Another distinction is that the impact of Soviet rule on Kazakh society, including religious life, was more damaging than in the rest of Central Asia – primarily because of the catastrophic damage wrought by the Stalinist famine of the early 1930s. At independence, the Kazakh nation's path of recovery from the Soviet experience was far from complete. This helps explain why, even more assertively than other regional states, Kazakhstan's leadership has promoted the restoration of traditional religious institutions and sought to shield these from foreign competition. This religious protectionism is directly related to the perceived vulnerability of these institutions. At independence, religious life in the republic appeared a *tabula rasa* to its leaders; a fact that increased the state's alarm at the massive inflow of assertive and well-funded religious groups from virtually all directions of the compass.

Yet the state itself saw a need to seek assistance abroad for the construction of religious institutions. Thus, while Kazakhstan embraced what we termed the "Skeptical/Insulating" model of state policy toward religion, it also sought to guide the restoration of religious institutions in society following seven decades of Soviet rule. In so doing, the state borrowed elements of the "Dominant Religion" model, but with the significant difference that it provided clear privileges not to a single religious community, as the model traditionally holds, but to religious communities considered traditional.

For this purpose, the government sought – under controlled circumstances – to establish relations with Turkish and especially Egyptian religious institutions. But these come with a baggage that may not be immediately visible. Almost by definition, such official religious institutions favor the scriptural and orthodox Islam at the expense of "folk" Islam. And even if Kazakhstan actively seeks to promote the more flexible Hanafi school of

jurisprudence, both the Soviet experience and more recent developments in Turkey indicate that political aspirations are far from anathema among Hanafi communities. They also suggest the very real risk of Salafi influences on nominally Hanafi religious institutions. Given the recent controversies in Egypt surrounding the actual curriculum at Egypt's Al-Azhar university, the choice of this institution as a key partner for Kazakhstan also begs the question what influence it will have on the Islam practiced in Kazakhstan.

An added contradiction is the government's stated aim to promote the restoration of both Hanafi and Sufi Islamic practices. While these historically tolerated each other, the growing tendency toward orthodoxy among official Islamic institutions has implied a decreased tolerance toward mysticism and Sufi practices, with the possible exception of the Sharia-acceptant Naqshbandi order. Both before and after independence, the muftiate in Kazakhstan has repeatedly displayed a hostility toward Sufism that complicates the government's stated goal.

Kazakhstan has also experienced an uptick in instances of extremism and terrorism. These, beginning in 2011, came as a cold shower for a government that appeared unprepared to meet this challenge. It has since acted decisively to counter this phenomenon through changes in its bureaucratic structure and in its legal framework. In so doing, the question is whether the state over-reacted. This is certainly the opinion of most Western champions of human rights and religious freedom, who point to the Kazakh government's prosecution of purportedly peaceful believers as evidence, and warn that such policies are not only reprehensible but also counter-productive, arguing that they tend to alienate religious communities and push them toward radicalization.

These arguments are serious and well-documented; and serious people can disagree about them. Indeed, the same question is the subject of intense debate in Western societies: which groups should enjoy the protection of

religious freedoms, and which are beyond the pale and cannot be tolerated by civilized states? It is clear that the Kazakh government is considerably more restrictive than its Western partners on this issue. Most Western states draw the line at groups that are directly involved in violence, or in the incitement to violence. But the definition of freedom of speech and assembly differs among Western countries. Most Western states do not actually prohibit organizations or communities; yet others do proscribe groups that claim to be peaceful in nature, but whose ideology is inherently violent – thus Germany’s ban on Hizb-ut-Tahrir, among other, and its close monitoring of radical religious communities and organizations. That said, no Western government goes so far as to prosecute individuals or communities for preaching the superiority of one religion over the other.

Yet while the United States prides itself on its protection of religious freedoms, the U.S. Government at both the federal and local level has acted to monitor and infiltrate religious communities in ways that have led the American Civil Liberties Union to accuse it of unconstitutional religious profiling of Muslims.¹⁶² The United Kingdom’s “Prevent” Strategy has similarly been accused by a UN Special Rapporteur of stigmatizing Muslims.¹⁶³ And it must be noted that Central Asians are perplexed by the laxity of Europeans toward radical religious groups that seek to undermine their social harmony and very statehood. The divergence of perspective is clear, and unlikely to be easily bridged.

Lost in the fog of this controversy is an important point: the need to separate the ethical question of where the line should be drawn from the question of the effectiveness of the restrictive policies embraced by Central Asian

¹⁶² David Harris, “Law Enforcement and Intelligence Gathering in Muslim and Immigrant Communities after 9/11”, *New York University Review of Law and Social Change*, vol. 123, 2010; American Civil Liberties Union, “Factsheet: The NYPD Muslim Surveillance Program”, at <https://www.aclu.org/other/factsheet-nypd-muslim-surveillance-program>.

¹⁶³ “Prevent Strategy ‘Could End Up Promoting Extremism’”, *Guardian*, April 21, 2016. (<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/apr/21/government-prevent-strategy-promoting-extremism-maina-kiai>)

leaders, including Kazakhstan. Western advocates often seem to equate their argument that policies are morally wrong with the argument that they are also counter-productive. Indeed, a virtual cottage industry emerged in the late 1990s to warn that Central Asian states' policies – and particularly Uzbekistan's – would end up exacerbating the problem of extremism.¹⁶⁴ This applied not only to the policies in the field of religion, but the general political system. For example, scholars argued that "Islamist movements in Central Asia are first and foremost a response to local authoritarian rule: the more authoritarian the state, the more pronounced political Islam will be in society."¹⁶⁵ Yet by now, it is manifestly clear that such warnings were misplaced. After more than a decade, Uzbekistan appears to have considerably less of a problem of extremism than Kazakhstan does. Liberal Kyrgyzstan may have the worst problem of violent extremism in the region; while the most authoritarian, Turkmenistan, hardly ever figures in these discussions. Clearly, the assumption that there is a direct link between "repression" and "radicalization" is not borne out in fact; neither does it figure prominently in the literature on radicalization in a global context.¹⁶⁶ Thus, while authoritarian policies can be legitimately criticized from a number of perspectives, the argument that they contribute to radicalization in Central Asia is misplaced.¹⁶⁷

This brings the discussion to Western policies toward Kazakhstan's secular governance. Kazakhstan's secularism is hardly ever raised as a factor

¹⁶⁴ Eg. Ahmed Rashid "The Fires of Faith in Central Asia," *World Policy Journal* Vol. 18, No. 1, 2001; Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, Yale University Press, 2002; Eric McGlinchey, "Autocrats, Islamists and the Rise of Radicalism in Central Asia", *Current History*, October 2005; Kathrin Lenz-Raymann, *Securitization of Islam: A Vicious Circle – Counter-Terrorism and Freedom of Religion in Central Asia*, Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2014.

¹⁶⁵ Eric McGlinchey, "The Making of Militants: The State and Islam in Central Asia", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 25 no. 3, 2005, p. 559.

¹⁶⁶ Royal United Services Institute, *Drivers of Violent Extremism: Hypotheses and Literature Review*. London: Royal United Services Institute, 2015.

¹⁶⁷ See argument in Svante E. Cornell, "Central Asia: Where Did Islamic Radicalism Go?" In Katya Migacheva and Bryan Frederick, eds., *Religion, Stability and Conflict in the Former Soviet Union*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017.

suggesting the country's importance to the West. Neither does the promotion of secular governance feature in the U.S. Freedom Support Act or comparable European legislation. In fact, to the extent that it figures, it is as a factor exposing the country to Western criticism. Perhaps this is because the principles of the secular state, secular systems of law, and secular education are so deeply embedded in the Western consciousness that they are simply taken for granted. As such, the fact that Kazakhstan has a secular system of government, a secular system of law and secular courts, and a secular educational system is not reflected upon.

Perhaps, accustomed to viewing the region through the lens of the USSR, Western states have narrowly fixed their attention on areas that have yet to be reformed, not acknowledging the positive aspects of what does exist. Dramatically absent from this approach is any recognition of how profoundly significant the features listed above are when viewed in the context of neighboring Muslim societies. In other words, those who persist in viewing Kazakhstan solely through the lens of post-Soviet development are blind to the important place it and its neighbors in Central Asia and Azerbaijan hold within the broader context of Muslim societies. These societies are not remote outliers to the core regions of Islam; they are themselves a core region of the faith.

Of course, Kazakhstan's model of state policy in the area of religion is by no means perfect. If it was, the country's leaders would not feel the need to make so many adjustments to the model. And while there is justified criticism that the state's policies have erred on the side of excessive restrictions at times, it is also patently clear that the Western criticism of Kazakhstan's policies miss the mark. By failing to accept the legitimacy of the laicist foundations of Kazakhstan's model of a secular state, many Western critics have disqualified themselves in the eyes of Kazakh officials. By not accepting the premise on which the Kazakh model is built, they have lost influence over the processes under way in Kazakhstan. At present,

Western critics face the choice of either adapting their criticism to these realities, or to continue to preach, as it were, only to the already converted. A more fruitful approach would be to accept the premises of the Kazakh model, and rather than take an antagonistic approach, work with Kazakh authorities to improve policies in the religious field, something that would in the long term enable Kazakhstan to be a model applicable to Muslim-majority societies elsewhere.

This study suggests that seen against the background of the Muslim world as a whole, Kazakhstan should be seen as a largely successful and functioning laboratory for a workable relationship between the state and religion. Western policy-makers should embrace the strengthening and improvement of secular statehood in Kazakhstan and the broader region as a strategic goal, and particularly the continued secular nature of law, courts, and educational institutions. Recognizing the ample shortcomings and deficiencies that exist, their efforts should be directed toward working patiently but tenaciously with government and society to improve these policies – but on the basis of an acceptance for the legitimacy and positive value of Kazakhstan’s model. This strategic goal should be assigned the same level of importance as security, democratic development, the protection of rights and freedoms, and economic development. Indeed, the advancement of secular governance, courts, and education across these regions may prove not only to be the key to progress in the other strategic areas but the most lasting contribution the West can make.

Author Bios

Svante E. Cornell, Ph.D., is Director of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center, co-founder of the Institute for Security and Development Policy, as well as Senior Fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council. His main areas of expertise are security issues, state-building, and transnational crime in Southwest and Central Asia. He holds a Ph.D. degree in peace and conflict studies from Uppsala University, where he was formerly Associate Professor of Government. His most recent book, with S. Frederick Starr, is *Long Game on the Silk Road: US and EU Strategy for Central Asia and the Caucasus*, published by Rowman & Littlefield in 2018.

S. Frederick Starr, Ph.D., is the founding chairman of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center, and a Distinguished Fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council. His research on the countries of Greater Central Asia, their history, development, internal dynamics, as well as on U.S. policy towards the region has resulted in twenty-two books and 200 published articles. He is the author of *Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane*, published by Princeton University Press in 2013.

Julian Tucker is Research Coordinator with the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center and with ISDP's Stockholm China Center. He holds an MA degree in Central Asian Studies from the Humboldt University in Berlin, and a BA in Anthropology and Middle Eastern Languages from McGill University in Montreal, Canada. He also pursued Uzbek language and history studies at the Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages.