

## **The Islamic Situation in Kazakhstan**

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### **Abstract**

*In modern Kazakhstan Islam is one of the factors of cultural self-identification, of the search for spiritual identity. We observe a growing complexity of the inner-islamic situation as well as the growth of religious feelings amongst the population and its influence on the situation of foreign missionaries and preachers.*

*Is there today such a thing as "Kazakh Islam"?*

*At the moment an explosion of islamization can be observed in Kazakhstan.*

*A spiritual leadership of Kazakh's Muslims has been established. The religious pilgrimage to Mecca becomes more and more popular.*

*There is a growing number of mosques, Islamic schools and Medresse, academies and institutes, as well as of Islamic print products in Kazakhstan.*

*The activity of 15 terrorist organizations identifying themselves as Islamic has been outlawed.*

*Islamic fundamentalism has not gained wide support, however a trend towards a politicization of Islam can be observed.*

*Despite a growing the religiousness amongst the population, particularly with the youth, the majority has a fragmentary knowledge of Islam.*

*Kazakhstan, Religion, Islam, Tengrianism, Shamanism, Kazakh traditions*

Since its introduction in Kazakhstan, Islam plays a very important role in the formation of Kazakh ethnic culture and national consciousness. In contemporary Kazakhstan Islam is an important factor in shaping cultural self-identification and spiritual identity /1 /.

Being one of the forms of ethnic identity, Islam participates in ethnic consolidation. The majority of Kazakh Muslims belong to the Turkic peoples who strive for mutual closeness as well as proximity with Turkic nations from abroad. Islam is the most widely-spread religion among the Kazakh population. Muslims of 24 nationalities constitute 70% of the population of Kazakhstan (11 million people). The majority of the Islamic population of Kazakhstan are the Kazakhs which account for 65% of the total population. The second major Muslim population are the Uzbeks. Next come the Uigurs, the Tatars, the Kirghiz, the Bashkir, the Tajiks, the Azerbaijani, the Dugans, the Turks, the Chechen and the Ingush. The Muslim community of Kazakhstan is composed not only of the native population, but also of the migrants from Muslim countries. Most of these migrants are Sunni Muslims.

Religious leaders take measures in order to unite the Muslims of Central Asia so as to resolve the pressing social problems and to fight the negative developments of public life as well as the expansion of radical parties and movements.

At the moment, one can witness the increase in growth of the process of Islamisation and rapid increase of religious feeling in the population of Kazakhstan. The current religious situation becomes more acute due to the activity of foreign missionaries and preachers and the influence of religion on the consciousness of the young. One can also notice the expansion in the field of activities of Islam and the complication of the religious factor within the Islamic structures. This matter, however, concerns not only the threat of religious fundamentalism and extremism.

The infiltration and proliferation of radical religious trends and the increase in armed incidents and actions constitute the reality of life in today's Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan even was included by the Ministry of national safety of the USA in the list of the dangerous countries posing terrorist threat.

We mostly talk about the considerable change in the status of the Muslim community (Ummah) of Kazakhstan. The differences in the varieties of the Kazakhs' perceptions of Islam – in other words the questioning of whether Kazakhstan should adopt a more “traditional” or “non-conventional” type of Islam – carries the threat of intra-ethnic divisions and oppositions. This difference in perception accounts for the increase in conflictual situations within the community between the urban (rejecting traditions) and the rural (orthodox) Muslims. There are cases when representatives of non-traditional Islam use violence against traditionally conservative rural Muslims.

The question of Kazakh religious identity is a cause for fierce debates. The range of opinions on this issue is extremely broad. Whether the Kazakhs are Muslims or whether it is the ancestral rituals of Tengrianism with elements of Shamanism which are inherent to them, are also questions that are present in the daily lives of the Kazakhs.

The current complexity of the religious situation is characterized not only by the problematic of the growing religiosity of the population or the conflicts between traditional Islam and the fundamental radical trends. The crucial question concerns the growing contradiction between traditional practices of the Kazakh people and the current process of Islamisation or between the general canons of Islam and particular Kazakh traditions.

There exists a plurality of opinions concerning the history of Islam in Kazakhstan.

Indeed, the religious situation on the territory of modern Kazakhstan has, at all times, distinguished itself by its complexity. In the first centuries of our era, the most widespread religions were Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, as well as various Christian trends.

Starting in the southern regions, the dissemination of Islam in the territories of modern Kazakhstan dates back to the seventh century and continued for several centuries. The history of proliferation of Islam in Kazakhstan during the Middle Ages is long and rather specific. Originally, Islam took its roots among the sedentary populations of Semirechye (Zhetysu) and Syr-Darya. It is a known fact that already in the tenth century, Islam was already practiced in the Karahanid Empire in Semirechye. A mark of that period – the tractate of Yusuf Balasaghuni (1015-1016), “Kutagu Billig” (“Fertile Knowledge”), reflects Muslim ideology.

Islam did not spread as quickly amongst the nomads as it did amongst the sedentary populations of the Turkic nations. According to Gumilev, the consolidation of Islam in a nomadic society is characterized by its complexity and proliferation of any religion requires freedom of spiritual space. Tengrianist (Tengri - a sky cult) Shamanism was the traditional religion of the nomadic Turkomen. There also existed worships of the spirit of the earth (Zher-ana) and the spirit of water (Sou-ana), as well as cults of fire and cattle. Islam coexisted well with local religions and continued to spread through the next centuries. We can speak about syncretism of Islamic elements and local pagan religions.

A special role in propagation of Islam among Turkic-nomads was played by the Sufi clergy. The founder of the Sufi order – Khoja Akhmet Yassawy (1103-1166/67) is considered by the Turkic Muslims to be the second sacred leader after Prophet Mohammed, and the city of Turkestan in the south of Kazakhstan where he preached – minor Mecca. His well known work "Hikmet" ("Knowledge") written in Turkic (Chagatai) language belongs to the common spiritual inheritance of all Turkic nations. Even now the Turkic peoples can read "Hikmet" in the original. In 1996 the text was published in Kazakh. The spiritual development of Muslims of the Central Asia that followed was closely connected with the traditions of Sufism.

The process of strengthening Islamic positions began when Berke Khan of the Golden Horde (1255-1266) and Uzbek Khan (Ozbek Khan) (1312-1340) were Islamized. Islam grew stronger in the XIV century under Timur.

The active role in Islam proliferation on the territory of Kazakhstan is attributed to missionaries from Arab countries. Later the strengthening of the position of Islam was reinforced as a result of the activity of Tatar mullahs, which were sent to Kazakhstan on personal command of Russian empress Catherine II.

According to the Russian orientalist R.G. Landa " During the conquest (and long before it)Tatars, knowing languages of the Central Asia and culture of Islam played an important role of intermediaries, interpreters, pathfinders, "guides" and advisers of the Russian merchants and government officials, teachers, mullahs and experts of local customs" /2/.

Islam was well-rooted among the Kazakh nobles – khans and sultans. Common people either continued to profess ancient pre-Islamic beliefs and officiate ancient ceremonies, or took to syncretism of Islamic elements and pre-Islamic traditions.

In the evidence of observers, travelers, scientists, and officials who depicted the everyday life of the Kazakhs, one can find records showing that they were not very religious.

Compared to the sedentary population of Central Asia, for example the Uzbeks, Kazakhs were not as religious throughout their history. In his book "The Description of the Kirghiz-kajsach or the Kirghiz-kajsac hords and steppes" Russian researcher Levshin writes that when questioned about their confession the Kazakhs answer: "I don't know". This gives the author the opportunity to state that "it is difficult to decide what the Kirghiz (*the former name for Kazakhs –E.S.*) are – Mohammedans, maniheyans, or pagans." He writes that Islam for the Kazakhs is intertwined with ancient pagan cults. They do not pray, do not exercise Muslim ceremonies (fasting) and "Islamism" persists only thanks to Central Asian and Tatar mullahs /3/.

Kazakh ethnographer of the nineteenth century, Chokan Valihanov, wrote: "Muslimism has not yet become our second nature. It threatens to separate people in the future" /4/.

Climate and geographical conditions (immensity of the territory) created objective difficulties for the expansion of Islam. The specificity of everyday life of the Kazakhs (life in yurts, seasonal migrations) also made it difficult to celebrate religious ceremonies (for example, namaz and other Islamic norms).

The Kazakhs were free from religious fanaticism. Kazakh religious tolerance helped peaceful coexistence of various religions. In several regions Christianity kept its influence for centuries. For example, Nestorianism was recognized among the Naimans, who moved at the end of the twelfth – the beginning of the thirteenth centuries from the Central Asia to East Kazakhstan and Semirechye.

Though nomadic life made it difficult for Islam to prosper among the Kazakhs, little by little Islam, with its monotheism and simple ceremonies, substituted polytheistic religions. In the course of Islamisation many customs and traditional Kazakh religious perceptions (worship of the spirits of the ancestors and holy sites) took new Islamic forms.

Moderate Islam of Sunni orientation of Hanafi Mazhab (Muslim school of law) currently prevails in Kazakhstan. Compared to other four schools of Islam it has moderate views, tolerance for dissentients and a rather uncomplicated religious service. A moderate unorthodox trend of Islam – Sufism – is widely spread in the south of Kazakhstan, where it adapted to the nomadic life of local Turkic population.

Islam did not play any important role in the political life of the Kazakh society before the Revolution; it had the form of moderate "household" Islam. It was important in everyday life of the people. Local clergy served the common needs of the Kazakhs.

During the Soviet period, the religious situation is characterized by a weakening of the position of Islam as a result of the policy of state atheism. Repressive actions were taken against Muslim clergy, many mosques were closed and destroyed. It was only in 1943 that Spiritual

Directorate of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan renewed its activity. Popular Islam, however, remained as means of self-identification of the Muslims and an important element of the mode of life of the people.

After the break-up of the USSR the situation in Kazakhstan from the religious point of view is exemplified not only by the revival of the religions traditions for Kazakhstan, namely Islam and Christianity, but by the appearance of other numerous religious trends.

The first years of independence were marked by the large scale construction of mosques and orthodox churches. Quran was published in Kazakh and Russian translations, the Bible (Injil) became available in Kazakh language. Special shops selling religious literature and calendars opened. Religious periodicals were published. Since 1997 the monthly "Islam Elemi" ("Islam World") and the newspaper "Nur Shapagat" were published.

According to official Kazakh data there are people of 130 nationalities who belong to 46 different confessions living in peace and harmony. Committee on religions of the Ministry of Culture of Republic of Kazakhstan informed that on January, 1<sup>st</sup>, 1990 there existed 671 religious associations in Kazakhstan, representing 10-15 confessions. Consequently, by the beginning of 2011 the number of religious associations should expand to 4479.

Statistics show that 65% of the associations are Muslim (Sunni, Shiit, Sufi Ahmadijsky Zhamagat) and 35% belong to other confessions, including 378 communities of Evangelical Baptist Christians, 241 communities belonging to the Russian orthodox church, 90 communities belonging to the Catholic church, about a hundred communities of Lutherans, 104 communities of Seventh day Adventists, 131 communities of Jehovah Witnesses, 45 communities of Pentecostals, 3 branches of Russian orthodox church abroad, 7 Old Believers churches, 5 Buddhist communities, 24 Judaic communities, 12 Krishna communities, 1 community of the Armenian Gregorian church, 23 Baha'I communities. These figures cover only the registered organizations.

Among believers there are followers of almost all world religions: Islam, Christianity (Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Protestantism), Buddhism as well as Judaism, Hinduism, ancient polytheistic cults and modern new trends. The religions traditional for Kazakhstan – Sunni Muslim and Russian orthodox Christianity – account for 60% of all religious communities registered in the republic and the majority of the religious people.

According to the official figures 70% of the population are Muslims, 25% - Orthodox (some sources give the figure of 28%), 1% - Catholics, 05% - Protestants, other confessions – less than 1%. But there has never been a broad survey on the question of which particular confession people belong to. These numbers - 70% of Muslims and 25% of Orthodox – are taken for granted. It gives identification of ethnic and confessional identity. Accordingly, all people belonging to "Muslim" nations are considered as ethnic Muslims and all Slavs – Russians, Ukrainians, Byelorussians, probably with the exception of Poles – are identified as Orthodox. In reality most of religious communities are multinational. There exist Kazakhs-Orthodox and Slav-Muslims.

Religious fervor of the population of Kazakhstan is exaggerated. According to sociologists, some part of the people living in Kazakhstan is indifferent to religion, especially in the cities and in the northern part of the country. The powerful atheist policy of the USSR pursued in the twentieth century was decisive in the fact that today there are atheists and hesitant people. According to the Kazakhstan experts religious people make up approximately 60% to 70% of the whole population.

Russian Orthodox Christianity is one of the major religious trends in Kazakhstan. Russian Orthodox Church belongs to the structure of Moscow Patriarchy. By decision of the Sacred Synod taken in 1991, it has three dioceses in Kazakhstan: Astana-Almaty, Shimkent and Ural. Russian Orthodox Church prepares priests at the Almaty diocesan theological school.

In 1991 Vatican took the decision to establish a Catholic episcopate in Kazakhstan. The Catholic cathedral in Karaganda is already erected.

The situation with religion has become quite complicated with attainment of independence. Besides traditional Islam and Orthodoxy there are several religious organizations of mystic trends working in Kazakhstan. Most active are "Society for Krishna Consciousness", "Seventh-day Adventist Church", "Jehovah Witness", "Church of the New Life", "White Brotherhood", Old Believers, Presbyterians, New Apostolic Church, Mennonites, Bahá'ís, "Unification Church of Sun Myung Moon", "Grace Church", and a number of others. Some of them were registered as secular associations (Dianetics Center and others). Besides the trends known earlier, there appeared new religious associations unknown before. For example, two churches were identified as engaged in destructive activity – "Scientology" and "The New Life".

Religious organizations functioning in the country actively work with all groups of the population. Missionaries of all possible trends come from the USA, Germany and South Korea as businessmen, teachers, health workers and other professionals.

Still their activities are aimed at propaganda of non-traditional confessions and trends, and spreading of proselyte literature among the people of Kazakhstan.

The Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan guarantees freedom of conscience and freedom of worship. Representatives of all confessions freely practice their activities. Kazakhstan is a secular state and no religion has a dominant position in everyday life, ideology or politics. The conception of Kazakhstan as a secular multi-national and multi-religious state implies equal rights for all nationalities and religious communities, granting them freedom of conscience.

The process of Islamic revival in Kazakhstan was followed by the process of revitalization of Islam. Growing number of Mosques, Madrasah, Muslim schools and Islamic institutions of higher education, Islamic publications, well educated ministers of religion come as evidence of reactivation of religious life.

Now there are 2.5 thousand Mosques in Kazakhstan (compared to 63 during the Soviet period). In 1999 the Central Mosque with a capacity to welcome more than three thousand people was opened in Almaty. The number of religious Muslims is permanently growing. Local Muslim organizations work with ethnic Muslims in order to "bring them back to faith". More and more young and middle-aged people turn to religion. Arab countries invest considerable amounts of money in the Islamic education of the young. Most of religious schools and institutions were also built with the money invested from abroad.

Structural changes in the religious establishment took place. Before January 1990 Muslim communities of Kazakhstan were subordinate to the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Central

Asia and Kazakhstan located in Tashkent. In 1990 Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Kazakhstan (SDMK) was established.

More and more believers go on a Hajj to Mecca. Though for most of believers the pilgrimage to the common Islamic holy places is hard to undertake. The number of Pilgrims visiting local holy places is growing. Several visits are considered equal to Hajj.

The interest in the Quran is growing. International competitions of Quran readings take place. As many believers did not study and can't read Arabic, they phonetically transcribed the Quran in Kazakh and learned the texts aurally. This helps the believers to learn the prayers necessary for the Namaz. Many people find the process of learning religious rules long and difficult that is why Islam rituals are mostly celebrated.

The position of Islam in family matters also grows stronger. Celebrations of Islamic traditions become an integral part of everyday life of the Kazakhs. Most Kazakhs consider themselves Muslims and celebrate at least some part of the rites and rituals. That concerns the Friday Namaz in the Mosque, religious holidays (Oraza, Qurban ait), the ritual of circumcision (Sunnat/Sundet), the obituary-obsequies rituals and marriage rituals.

During religious holidays people perform charitable actions, especially Muslim businessmen. They give immolated cattle to the poor, as well as personalized donations to orphan homes and hospitals. Growing importance of the religious holidays is stressed by the fact that children born on those days get names like Aisha, Islam, Ramasan, Medina, Oras.

During the Muslim holidays of the Great Fast (Orasa) and Leyla Al-Qadr, the Night of Power (Kadyr Tuni) there is a lack of space in the Mosque for all who want to go there. However, only a small part of believers go to the Mosque regularly and celebrate some of the obligatory rites of Islam (ablutions and others). Many Kazakhs started to fast during the month of Ramadan. These people are much respected; they are often invited for the evening meal (auyz ashar). To have them at the table is considered to be a blessing for the hosting person who does not fast.

New features of socio-political and cultural life in Kazakhstan have a big influence on Islam. There is a real Islamisation boom in the society of the country. The growth of the Kazakhs' religiosity is incredibly quick. Besides the traditional Islam there are widely spreading Islamic trends that are not characteristic of the Kazakh practices. Especially in big cities, the number of followers of Islam with specific appearance (bearded, in short trousers), type of behavior and world-view, has grown.

Young people having no serious religious education fall under influence of extremist movements and join them. It is the youth that makes 80 percent of the members of such organizations, and 10 percent of them are under 18 years of age.

Moderate Islam of Sunni trend, characterized by tolerance for those of different beliefs, was most broadly present in Kazakhstan. Currently, not only traditional Islam and Sufi traditions reappear. There are different Islamic centers and organizations, sects and trends, religious extremist groups that appear over the country. Whereas traditional Islamic practice involves traditional forms of Muslim society, Mosques, and Madrasahs, "nontraditional" Islam is characterized by organization of socio-political movements, parties and mass manifestations.

Events in the neighboring and distant Muslim countries affect the situation of Islam in the country. Radical Islamists in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kirgizstan openly engage in the brainwashing of the population with the aim to construct an Islamic state. According to special services, the Islamic fundamentalism and extremism have found their way into Kazakhstan as well. Although it has not widely spread yet, there was no overt attempt to politicize Islam, such tendency remains nonetheless. Unique to Central Asia, the "Party of Islamic revival of Tajikistan" officially exists in Tajikistan. In Kazakhstan, however, activity of political organizations on a religious basis is legally forbidden. Still there are cases of appeals to Islam of certain political forces of nationalist orientation despite official prohibition.

Activity of 15 radical religious organizations is officially forbidden on the territory of Kazakhstan. There are "Al Kaida", Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Kurdish National Congress, Islamic Movement of East Turkestan "Brothers-Moslems", the "Taliban" movement, "Boz Gurd" (Grey Wolf), "Osbat al-Ansar", Jamaat of Mujahideens of Central Asia (another name for the "Group of Islamic Jihad"), "Hizb-ut-Tahrir al-Islami" ("Party of freedom of Islam"), occultist mystical religious trends "Allja Ajat" and "Ata Jol" (another name "Ak Jol") which emerged in Kazakhstan.

Some of them treat religious doctrines in their own ways. So in Jamaat of Mujahideens came to life the notion of "Amoliet". It meant making money by committing robbery, brigandage and murder of "infidels" ("non Muslim by birth"), justified by the needs of Jihad (war against the "infidels").

Religious extremist groups conduct active propaganda among the population spreading extremist Islamic literature. Lately they started using legal methods, for example, arrange charitable events during the "Oraza-Ajt" festivities.

Two "nonconventional" trends have already been formed: the Salafits (often representatives of forbidden in Kazakhstan Wahhabism who call themselves Salafits) and the Quranits. The supporters of this conservative Islamic trend are characterized by denial of the Sunny and recognition of the Quran as the exclusive authoritative source of divine revelation. They use direct references to the Quran and aspire to restore primary "true" and "pure" Islam. They reject any innovations (Bid'ah) in Islam as created by people. They adhere to the principle of monotheism (Tawhid) and deny the Kazakh cult of the sacred and the ancestors considering it deviation from monotheism.

Among Salafits (more known as Wahhabites) one notices the presence of armed groups inclined to radical actions. In July 2011 there was an armed conflict in the west of the country, that led to human losses on both sides of the Islamists and the law enforcement authorities.

The Salafit trend is mostly present in the western areas of Kazakhstan – Atyrau, Mangistau, Aktyubinsk. The religious extremism arrived there from the Caucasus and with active propaganda of missionaries from the Arab states who came to work on oil development projects.

Salafits were trained in Almaty Madrasah and in Arab-Kazakh University of Shymkent, both were later closed by the authorities. Salafits are also trained at the Saudi Arabian Culture Center that is still functioning. Moreover, having taken a visa for a hajj to Saudi Arabia, young Kazakhs remain there to study in the Universities that belong to the Salafit movement.

Spiritual Directorate of the Muslims of Kazakhstan suggested to forbid the Islamic radical trend "Salafia" as one of the more dangerous. However, it is hardly possible to stop the propagation of this movement by forbidding it. Complex measures are necessary and, most importantly, it is necessary to solve the social problems of the youth, to provide education, jobs, and salaries.

The Kazakhstan Quranists consider Salafites to be their adversaries, not allies. Several years ago, the Quranist movement "Izgi Amal" was very active, its supporters belonging to the political elite. The Quranists are very dynamic with their propaganda aimed at Kazakhstan, which is administered through International Quran Center situated in North Virginia and through Internet sites in English and Arabic. They consider that Muslims can sell and take drugs, as there is nothing said against it in Quran. Quranists do not set the Jihad aims, they strive to transform Islam in a peaceful way.

Peaceful movements within "non-traditional" Islam can also help radical ideas to colonize minds or they can themselves turn into radicalism. It is impossible to determine the limits after which peaceful moderate religious tendencies of "non-traditional Islam" become transformed into radical ones.

Events in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and Kirgizstan make the threat of radical Islam even more eminent. "Non-traditional" Islamic movements with ideologies glorifying the idea of Jihad present the source of threat for national security and social stability, as well as the unity of society in Kazakhstan. Followers of "non-traditional" Islam are ready for armed actions, clashes and terrorism. They attempt to involve young people in armed political struggle using their energy and religious ignorance.

Expansion of religious feelings among the youth has several causes; mostly social –lack of chance to get education, work, and housing. In such situation the young turn to new "non-traditional" trends of Islam.

More and more frequently religious mood is known for its outbursts in the prisons of Kazakhstan. It oftentimes happens that radical Islam spreads through penitentiaries. Security structures fight hard with the Salafites, imprisoning them. The Salafites in long term imprisonment sermonize and carry out propaganda among the prison community. They criticize social injustice thus attracting new followers, who are deeply inspired by radical ideas and become extremists by the time they leave prison.

The position of Islamic radicals becomes stronger in southern and western regions. According to special services, religious situation in the West of the country gives rise to concern. In Atyrau members of one of the unregistered in Kazakhstan religious trends carried acts of profanation on Muslim cemeteries. The monuments and photos on the marble gravestones, that were judged not belong to genuine Islam, were the pretext for vandalism. The gravestones were broken, the photos of the deceased were scratched and painted over.

In the northern part of Kazakhstan a new pseudo-religious movement "Ata Joly" ("Road of Ancestors") with its branch "Ak Jol" was formed within the Islamic frame. "Ata Joly" demands special attention, because of its activity and healing methods it has gained many adepts. "Ata Joly" outlined an itinerary for a healing religious pilgrimage to holy places of Kazakhstan. Followers of "Ata Joly" should undertake a pilgrimage (ziarat) to holy places (often questionable) to come in contact with souls of the ancestors ("aruah") and obtain their personal blessing that will help to get rid of illnesses and bad habits, or to reach success in one's carrier. Such tours happen rather often in the South and the West of Kazakhstan. However, the northern part of the country did not see such events earlier. "Ata Joly" makes a good business out of these pilgrimages and gets steady income. Expenses of one person on such religious tour reach 65 thousand tenge. Dozens of thousands of people go on such "pilgrimages" by car that carries a little white Islamic flag symbolizing purity of faith.

The "healing" methods of "Ata Joly" have nothing to do with alternative medicine. The followers become convinced that they are blessed with healing powers and holiness ("Aulie"). In order to make one "holy" ("Aulie"), they manipulate his consciousness, use his emotions, draw parallels between his present with the past of his ancestors. The activity of "Ata Joly" causes destructive changes in the mentality of a person and greatly harms this person's mental and physical health. There were cases of suicide. "Ata Joly" and "Elle Ayat" were forbidden in the Republic of Kazakhstan in January 2009 by court decision. But the life-threatening activities of these movements went far beyond Kazakhstan, into Russia and Belorussia. The Islamic factor is becoming more active in the East of Kazakhstan as well.

Followers of non-traditional religions forbid any medical interference in the natural development of the body. Even in case of life-threatening danger they refuse blood transfusions. Some women in Semey for the reason of religious fanaticism give birth to their children at home running serious risk for their lives as well as their children's. They refuse to vaccinate children. Such cases are still rare but they are on the increase. In 2010 sixteen families gave formal note refusing vaccination of children for religious reasons. Doctors and representatives of traditional religions carry out educational work among the population, explaining that Islam and Christianity have never been against medicine

Many non-traditional religious movements spread their beliefs among socially vulnerable strata of society – among the poor, large families and single mothers. Special attention by representatives of religious movements is paid to women, because, for different reasons, it is mostly the women who bring up children. The woman influences greatly the spiritual and moral development of the child.

Religious fanaticism of the parents can violate children's rights. Thus there was an illegal commercial kindergarten of radical trend closed in Almaty. Children learned Arabic and basics of religion. Kindergartners carried hijabs. There are cases when parents forbid girls to go to school, as they cannot put on hijab for the lessons. Authorities are alarmed by the quick propagation of radical ideas. Economic success of the country is no panacea against the activity of radical religious movements. Globalization and integration of Kazakhstan into international processes enhance these threats.

The measures of fighting religious extremism should be of integrated type. National security services control proselyte activity of Islam missionaries, confiscate weapons and extremist publications.

To prevent the increase in dispersion of dangerous material, religious extremist texts undergo religious expert evaluation. The statutes of religious associations, audio and video products and other publications are checked. The state takes seriously this question because the multitude of extremist Islamic movements is regarded as a threat to stability and unity of the Kazakh society.

But more strict state control can violate freedom of conscience.

Sometimes the expansion of radical ideas is connected with unsatisfactory work of local Muslim clerics. Many experts are very critical about the activity of SDMK. Mosque imams are often poorly trained and unprofessional in their work. Not all of them have higher or secondary specialized religious education. It is not always that mullahs can correctly explain the essence of traditional Islam to believers, and, moreover, they do not dare to participate in discussions on religious questions and Salafism with representatives of radical movements active in Kazakhstan.

The problem of lack of theologians and cult servants with good religious education is not new. Upon gaining independence by Kazakhstan, this was the most crucial aspect when religious revival began. Representatives of Muslim clergy did not have special religious education or any deep knowledge of Islamic theology, neither did they study Arabic.

Positions of official Islam were weakened by almost a century of state atheism policy. Many mosques were closed during the soviet period. Representatives of traditional Islam found themselves in a difficult position compared to preachers of radical Islam, professionally well trained and profusely financed from abroad by such countries as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Egypt and Syria. Severe competition with Islam radicals, in attracting people to the mosques as well, was affected by the low level of the training of the mullahs.

The question of providing all Kazakhstan mosques with highly educated staff is quite critical. 50 imams per year graduate from the only Islamic University in Kazakhstan. SDMK lacks funds to train them. The severe lack of well educated religious people is one of the reasons why radical trends of Islam propagate.

In their turn, when criticized, representatives of SDMK reply that their resources for propaganda of Hanafi Mazhab to which the Muslims of the country traditionally belong are quite limited. The poor social conditions in which imams live also play their role. Some rural mosques do not have any imams at all. It is there that representatives of radical movements start their activity.



The leaders of Muslim community are alarmed by the growing influence of various Islamist groups in Kazakhstan. The representatives of the clergy are troubled by the fact that young people are religiously uneducated and join other movements. The line between moderate religiosity and radical fanatic ideas is very thin and young people cross it even without seeing it.

Imams started to carry conversations with people about religion and to instruct the young about wearing beards and hijab. They popularize the values of "traditional religion" and explain the threat of radical movements for the national security.

Imams emphasize the importance of religious education of young people. They suggest that believers should study Islam in mosques, Madrasah, at the official Internet sites of the big Mosques.

Education is an important part of the integrated measures against religious extremism. SDMK speaks for the broad educational activity within the population. Though the interest in religion is progressing, most Muslims in Kazakhstan, as well as the representatives of the clergy, do not systematically have knowledge of religion's basics. For instance, in nineteen nineties it was popular among the young people to carry amulets ("tumar"). They were made of cloth with a surah of the Quran written on paper. Amulets were blessed by mullahs in mosques. And they were thought to belong to Islamic tradition. Today religiously educated people do not carry amulets as they do not correspond to the Islamic canons.

One becomes acquainted with Islam in the family, by reading books, information sites, discussions on the Internet forums or with the help of a preacher in the mosque. But because of the lack of information they sometimes fall under the influence of missionaries of extremist movements directly in the street. Authorities and leaders of Muslim clergy are alarmed not just by the growing religious activity of Kazakhs, but by the fact that they join radical movements.

In the middle of the nineteenth century one could acquire Islamic education with local mullahs or in the Muslim educational institutions in Ufa and Kazan. For example according to "Kazakh" paper (1917), in ten years 154 Kazakhs graduated from Madrasah "Galya" in Ufa /5/. In the Soviet period Kazakh youth acquired religious education in Uzbekistan.

It is currently possible to acquire elementary spiritual education and to study Arabic at the mosque courses. One can also acquire Secondary Muslim education in Madrasahs in Merke, Lugovoi, Taraz, Shymkent and Almaty and higher religious education at the Islamic University "Nur Mubarak". Imams are also trained in foreign theology institutions of the Eastern countries. The best university students were sent on the account of foreign sponsors to study in high schools of Egypt, Turkey, Pakistan, Syria and Kuwait. However, they were often sent to Muslim universities where they studied the Quran and Islamic theology. It was one of the external types of Islamist training.

There is the Islamic Institute of advanced training at the Spiritual Directorate of the Muslims of Kazakhstan (SDMK). 800 imams got further training there.

Muslim clergy pays great attention to the dissemination of information about Islam, especially among the young people. That was the aim of the first Islamic TV channel "Asyl Arna" launched under the guidance of SDMK. The programs give interpretation of Islam, religious movements, and clarify the issue of interethnic peace.

The Council "Foundation for support of Islam culture and education" is one of the tools to provide population with knowledge about Islam. The foundation assists in publishing books about traditional Islam and the informative spiritual magazine "Islam in Kazakhstan".

In order to provide the young generation with religious education a new school subject "Religious studies" was introduced. As well as the quality of the text books, the fact that the new subject was taught by the people, who themselves did not have profound knowledge in the field of religion, were criticized. Only two universities train teachers in "Religious studies" that is why the shortage of trained specialist is so severe.

All these measures should help to provide knowledge about religions in Kazakhstan and to form progressive social consciousness of the young people.

A new concept of Kazakh moderate Islam is suggested as a possible solution in the struggle with the radical movements. It is currently in the stage of development.

There exists a variety of approaches to the understanding of Islam in Kazakhstan, as well as ethnic and Islamic understanding. There are different concepts of "the Kazakh Islam": a popular Islam at the level of ceremonies and everyday life, a synthesis of Islam and elements of pre-Islam beliefs and cults, and a Sufi doctrine of Khoja Akhmet Yassawy. There also exists a variant of mild religiosity of Kazakhs.

Traditionally Kazakhs belong to the religious trend of Muslim-Sunni influenced by ideas of Sufism. There is an opinion, mostly among intellectuals, that the original religion of Kazakhs is Tengrianism (a sky cult), and efforts should be taken for its revival.

There exists a threat that under the influence of the followers of Islam, non-traditional for Kazakhstan, the society can be doomed to splitting into groups. Urban Muslim-Kazakhs often oppose conservative traditions, while rural Muslims remain mostly faithful to "traditional Islam".

How can we expect Islam to develop in our country in this case?

In order to settle this question it is necessary to choose an integrated approach, taking national traditions into account. The specificity of Islam in Kazakhstan is determined by its intertwining with national traditions, devotion of Kazakhs to customs and traditions. Islam of Hanafiyah trend prevailing in Kazakhstan was close to the spiritual specificity of Kazakhs. Kazakhs did not belong to orthodox Muslims. Many Kazakhs celebrate rites and ceremonies never thinking about their inherent meanings. In other words, religious traditions tightly interlaced with national customs. In this way appeared a synthesis of Islam with ancient Turkic beliefs. Islam in Kazakhstan, together with the main canons of Islam, imbedded national traditions of ancestors /6/.

Currently one can witness the search of the Kazakh concept of Islam. In the time of Islamist radical activity, which presents a serious danger for the country, it is necessary to have a homegrown alternative to radical Islam. The agency for affairs of religions develops measures to oppose religious extremism in Kazakhstan. It has suggested the idea of a new concept of "moderate peaceful Islam". It proposes a further upgrade of the status of the traditional Islam of Sunni trend of Hanafi Mazhab and reinforcement of the role played by the Muslim clergy in Kazakhstan.

To our mind, the concept implies further development of the spiritual part of Islam and not the ritual part. The task is to revive traditional Islam, by showing the culture of Islam and its Muslim values. At the same time the concept of "moderate peaceful Islam" means that it is inadmissible for radical forces to use Islam for political purposes in multi-confessional Kazakhstan. It permits to diminish Islamo-phobia in the society. The chairman of the Agency for affairs of religions Lama Sharif put forward the initiative "One nation – one religion". We consider that this concept contradicts the Law "About freedom of confession and religious associations" which states that "no religion or religious association takes any advantages in relation to others" /7/.

Kazakhstan is a multinational state where different ethnic groups freely practice various religions. These are the main values of the country and they are the basis of stability of the Kazakh society. Sharif's thesis causes negative consequences for and threatens public stability and inter-confessional consent in the country.

The Republic of Kazakhstan is a secular state in which religion is separated from the state. The preference and state support for one religion harms others. This religion becomes opposed to all other dogmas which peacefully co-exist in the country. The concept of development of one particular religion breaks the principle of non-interference of the state in affairs of religious associations and impairs religious tolerance in the country.

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Orthodox church in Almaty. Photo of the author

