

American Foreign Policy Council

KAZAKHSTAN

QUICK FACTS

Population: 18,360,353 (estimated July 2016)

Area: 2,724,900 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Kazakh (Qazaq) 63.1%, Russian 23.7%, Uzbek 2.9%, Ukrainian 2.1%, Uighur 1.4%, Tatar 1.3%, German 1.1%, other 4.4% (estimated 2009)

Muslim 70.2%, Christian 26.2% (mainly Russian Orthodox), other 0.2%, atheist 2.8%, unspecified 0.5% (estimated 2009)

Government Type: Presidential republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$128.1 billion (estimated 2015)

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated January 2017)

OVERVIEW

Unlike its ex-Soviet Central Asian neighbors and Russia, Kazakhstan has rarely seen attacks by religious hardliners. The rhetoric of Islamist danger accompanying the U.S.-led “war on terror” and the experiences of neighboring states with terrorism played a significant role in shaping the Kazakh government’s views on the threat of religious extremism and terrorism, and its subsequent counterterrorism responses. A series of terrorist incidents occurred in 2011, shattering Kazakhstan’s image of “an oasis of stability” in the ocean of political turmoil. In response, the government intensified its counterterrorism measures and tightened control over religious organizations. Critics of this interference in the business of religious groups maintain that the rise of militant forms of Islam have been exaggerated by the Nazarbayev government, which used the threat of extremism as a pretext for clamping down on religious and political dissent. Some analysts expressed doubts over the official narrative of violent religious extremism, pointing out the criminal backgrounds of Kazakh “terrorists” apprehended to date.

However, concerns over religious extremism persist for a reason. Against the backdrop of deteriorating socio-economic conditions and growing disparities in wealth, there has been some increase in the rank-and-file members of radical Islamic groups in Kazakhstan as well as Kazakh foreign fighters in the Middle East. The most troubling aspect of detained and prosecuted Kazakh jihadists is their relative youth. With more than 40 percent of Kazakhstan's 18.36 million population (July 2016 est.) under the age of 25, the radicalization of youth targeted by Islamist recruiters is becoming an ever higher government priority. Kazakhs who return home from the battlefields of Syria and Iraq will pose another significant, and related, security challenge.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Prior to the wave of terrorist violence in 2011, Kazakhstan had seen little Islamist activity. For both historical and socio-cultural reasons, Kazakh Muslims have been known to be less religious than their Uzbek and Tajik counterparts. The less-developed religious infrastructure, the lack of influential clergy, and the presence of a substantial Christian Russian minority created an unfavorable environment for radicalization of Muslims in Kazakhstan following the break-up of the Soviet Union. The relative socio-economic prosperity in this resource-rich nation has kept Islamic radicalization at bay. Of the 22 terrorist incidents recorded by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) in Kazakhstan since its independence in December 1991, Islamists claimed only three attacks.¹

The first attack took place in September 2000, when two police officers were shot dead in Almaty. The *Uighur Liberation Organization* (currently known as the East Turkestan Liberation Organization), which advocates an independent “Turkestan” and separatism from China, is suspected of perpetrating that incident.² Similar to other terrorist incidents, this attack was minor in terms of lethality, but had a symbolic impact. The incident indicated that Kazakhstan had shifted from being a mere waypoint for Islamist activity to an actual target for extremists.³

The following years saw a rise in the activities of *Hizb ut-Tabrir al-Islami* (HT), with the group becoming the primary target of the Kazakh government's counter-extremist efforts. HT is a clandestine radical Islamist organization that operates in 40 countries. In Kazakhstan, HT cells were first detected in 1998 in the country's south. At that time, local authorities intercepted the illegal distribution of leaflets and brochures calling for change in the constitutional system and the establishment of the caliphate. By the year 2000, HT membership in Kazakhstan rose to the low hundreds, and continued expanding in the years that followed, eventually leading to an official ban on the group by the Kazakh government in 2005.⁴ Though ostensibly non-violent in nature, there are indications that HT's ultimate goals include a *ji-*

had against America and the replacement of existing political regimes with a caliphate (*Khilafah* in Arabic), a theocratic dictatorship based on *sharia* (Islamic religious law). These key aspects of HT ideology appeal to a small number of Central Asian *Salafists*. What explains the party's success in the region is its ability to adapt its message to local contexts and avoid theological debates.⁵

In 2006, Kazakh and Kyrgyz authorities launched a joint operation that impaired the HT network in both countries⁶ and dismantled the routes that were used to deliver propaganda materials with extremist content and financing from abroad.⁷ As a result of the operation, Uzbek citizen Otabek Muminov, the leader of the HT "information-analytical center," was detained and extradited to Uzbekistan. Mahamat-Yusuf Mamasadykov, the head of the organization's headquarters for Central Asia, was also apprehended in Jalalabad, Kyrgyzstan.

In 2007-2010, the activities of radical Islamic groups, chief among them HT, but also including *Jamaat Takfir* (which was discovered in Kazakhstan's western region in 2008⁸), focused on the dissemination of Islamist literature and propaganda, as evidenced by the nature of criminal investigations and trials conducted by Kazakhstan's security forces during that time.⁹ The members of *Jamaat Takfir* and several other *Salafist* organizations active in the region called for the participation of the faithful in *jihad*, with the objective of establishing a global Islamic state.¹⁰

Salafism, an ultra-conservative Islamist ideology, came to Kazakhstan by way of the Caucasus and took hold mostly in the Atyrau, Mangistau, and Aktyubinsk regions. There, the ideology has been reinforced by missionaries from Saudi Arabia working in the energy industry in the Caspian region. Kazakh authorities were forced to close the operations of the Almaty Madrasah and the Arab-Kazakh University of Shymkent, but the Culture Center of the Saudi Arabian Kingdom in Almaty still provides education for *Salafis*.¹¹

Kazakhstan's National Security Committee (KNB), an internal security service, has also alleged that *al-Jihad al-Islami* (also known as the Islamic Jihad Union, or IJU), an offshoot of the al-Qaeda-affiliated *Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan* (IMU), established its cells in Kazakhstan. The group preaches anti-Western ideology and, like the IMU, opposes secular rule in Uzbekistan.¹² The IJU has been waging *jihad* in the Afghan-Pakistan region, and maintains close ties with al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders. The majority of IJU members come from Central Asia, including a small contingent of Kazakh foreign fighters.¹³

Another battleground in the fight against religious extremism is Kazakhstan's prisons. As efforts to combat the spread of *Salafism* often result in the incarceration of the movement's adherents, many *Salafis* have used the country's penitentiaries as a platform for proselytizing. Their religious message, with its criticism of social injustice, has been successful in attracting new followers from among their fellow inmates. Upon their release, these inmates may go on to join extremist organizations. While

the exact number of those radicalized in prisons is unknown, some of the attackers in the terrorist acts in Aktobe and Almaty discussed below had previously spent time in prison for various crimes, according to official sources. In 2011, Kazakhstan's government responded to this situation by closing all mosques, churches and other places of worship in its prisons, and sentencing some prisoners to solitary confinement for praying in their cells.¹⁴ In summer 2016, the Kazakh Ministry of Interior and the Penal Committee government held a roundtable supported by the U.S. Embassy to discuss strategies for preventing radicalization in prisons. These include forensic examination of religious literature entering prisons, organizing meetings between the inmates and theologians, priests, and imams, and working with psychologists to develop approaches to countering violent extremism.¹⁵

HT and other radical Islamist organizations remain active in Kazakhstan, exploiting the deteriorating economic situation, corruption, and discrimination in parts of the country. The focus of Kazakhstan's counterterrorism measures has recently centered on another group – *Jund al-Kilafah* (Soldiers of the Caliphate, or JaK) – that claimed responsibility for bombings in the western city of Atyrau and attacks against police in the southern city of Taraz in 2011. The spate of terrorist violence began with a suicide bombing in May in Kazakhstan's western town of Aktobe, followed by a car explosion in Astana. In July of the same year, security forces carried out an offensive against suspected extremists that left 13 dead in western Kazakhstan. Atyrau became a site of two explosions in October, and the following month two police officers were killed in Taraz.¹⁶

JaK is a transnational terrorist group based in the North Caucasus and the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. Its Kazakh wing, known as Zahir Baibars Battalion, was established sometime between 2008 and 2011 by nine Kazakh mercenaries in the Afghan province of North Waziristan. The Battalion became affiliated with JaK in 2011 and continued to lead terrorist operations in the west and south of Kazakhstan. In 2011, JaK released a videotape in which its members threatened the Kazakh government with retaliation if it failed to retract a law banning women from wearing the veil. The following year, JaK published two more videos of attacks against ISAF forces in the Khost province of Afghanistan. It also claimed responsibility for the 2012 Toulouse shooting attributed to Mohamed Merah, a French citizen, who was killed by French police in a shootout.¹⁷

Kazakhstan's government eventually laid blame for the 2011 terrorist attacks on the Islamists. Initially, however, the government portrayed the 2011 violence as attacks by members of the organized criminal groups sheltering behind the guise of religion. The prosecutors dismissed the May 2011 suicide bombing in Aktobe as the work of Islamists and instead laid the blame on a local kingpin. Another example of the inextricability of Islamism and criminality in Kazakhstan is a series of gunmen attacks in Aktobe on June 6, 2016 that left at least 17 people, including 11 "extremists" dead. Kazakh authorities labeled the incident a terrorist act, but later re-framed it as

a foiled *coup d'état*, only to return to the initial interpretation with a twist: the attack was blamed on militants belonging to “non-traditional religious movements” acting on direction from foreign groups. No credible claims of responsibility have ever surfaced for the attack. The government charged Tokhtar Tuleshov, a wealthy Kazakh businessman, and his accomplices, for the attack as well as for the popular protests in response to the land reform announced by President Nazarbayev. Tuleshov was apprehended in January 2016 and charged with drug trafficking, human trafficking, and the financing of a transnational organized criminal group. Several months later, in November 2016, the businessman was charged with plotting the coup against President Nazarbayev, the illegal possession of weapons, and extremism in the closed-door trial by a military court.¹⁸ Another attack by a lone gunman on a police station on July 18, 2016 put Almaty on a high-terrorist alert. The government alleged that the gunman who killed five people, including three policemen, was a radical Islamist.¹⁹ However, the reports of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Kazakhstan suggest that the perpetrator sought revenge on law enforcement structures for his previous imprisonments.²⁰ The fact that he dodged his original plan to kill judges due to the large number of civilians present in the courtroom for an attack on the police also does not necessarily conform to traditional terrorist scenarios.

The rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) in the Middle East presents another security threat to authorities in Kazakhstan. ISIS has successfully recruited scores of Central Asian Muslims, who have since moved to Syria and Iraq, in some instances with their families, to fight on the side of ISIS. Several Islamist groups, including the IMU, pledged an oath of allegiance to ISIS.²¹ According to Kazakhstan’s security services, there are at least 400 Kazakhs now active in the Syria/Iraq theater—an increase of 30 percent from the government’s January 2015 estimate.²² Several propaganda videos (e.g., “Kazakh Fighter Calls His Countrymen to Jihad in Syria or Home,” released in July 2014²³ and “How Kazakh Children Execute Enemies of Islam,” published in January of 2015) have appealed directly to Kazakh Muslims to join ISIS and to act in support of the caliphate, either at home or in Syria, and have threatened the Nazarbayev government with violent overthrow. No reliable evidence exists to conclude that this new strategy has been working, but the participation of the Kazakh men in insurgency in Syria and Iraq has created a novel problem – the radicalization of Kazakh women who fell under the influence of their extremist husbands or other relatives. A new report released by the International Organization for Migration contends that the tendency for radicalization of women who find themselves in strong social isolation is a new phenomenon emerging in the last five years in the Central Asian states.²⁴

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

According to Kazakhstan's most recent national census, carried out in 2009, approximately 65 percent of Kazakhstan's citizens identify themselves as Muslim.²⁵ The majority of Kazakh Muslims adhere to the Hanafi *madhhab* (Muslim school of law). Less than one percent of the population professes to be Sunni of the Sha'afi school, or Shi'a, Sufi, or Ahmadi.²⁶ The highest concentration of practicing Muslims is located in Kazakhstan's southern region, bordering Uzbekistan, where Kazakhstan's Uzbek minority is concentrated. As in neighboring states, the number of mosques in Kazakhstan's has grown significantly since the country's independence. In 1989, there were only 46 mosque congregations in all of Kazakhstan. By 1998, that number had expanded to more than 1,000. By 2003, Kazakhstan had 1652 registered Muslim associations,²⁷ and in 2009 (the last year for which authoritative figures are available), there were 2,308 registered mosques affiliated with the Spiritual Association of Muslims of Kazakhstan (SAMK), and around 70 independent mosques.²⁸ The government funded the reconstruction and building of some new mosques, but the majority of new religious infrastructure in Kazakhstan to date has been sponsored from the Arab states.

Modern-day Kazakhs are the descendants of nomadic tribes who converted to the Sunni branch of Islam by the end of nineteenth century. Even after their conversion, these nomads continued to combine their pre-Islamic traditions and practices with the precepts of their new religion.²⁹ The policies of Tsarist and Soviet Russia only reinforced the blending of indigenous worldviews with Islamic traditions. As a result, Islam has become inseparable from the traditional life course of the Kazakhs and from the community in which these traditions prevail.³⁰ Today, as in the past, the "Muslimness" of Kazakhs is commonly derived from their ethnic and communal identification, rather than strict observance of Islamic laws and prohibitions.³¹

The SAMK is the organization that leads the Kazakh Muslims adhering to the Hanafi *madhhab*, the only official religious school of thought in the republic. Islamic groups practicing their faith outside state-sponsored religious institutions are either regarded as pseudo-Muslim by the SAMK, or as extremist and terrorist by the government. The SAMK official status is that of a religious association, which serves as an independent intermediary between state authorities and its congregation. In practice, SAMK has become an arm of the state, keeping a watchful eye on the Muslim population through the supervision of mosque personnel, licensing construction of mosques, rotation of imams, the coordination of *Hajj* travel, and other forms of control.³² There are over 1,500 mosques registered with the government.³³ The SAMK, however, does not and cannot control all Islamic organizations and associations in the country. There are many mosques, particularly in the southern part of Kazakhstan, that are not subordinated to the SAMK. Also, local mosques existing in the countryside remain unregistered with the Ministry of Justice. Therefore, they also escape the supervision of the SAMK. According to expert estimates, the number of non-registered mosques, which defy the SAMK's authority, is almost two times greater than that of registered mosques.³⁴

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Formally, Kazakhstan remains a secular state. The Nazarbayev government has promoted “official” Islam as part of Kazakhstan’s cultural identity and in an effort to strengthen economic cooperation with resource-rich states of the Middle East and Asia. It has, however, avoided emphasizing any close relationship between Kazakhstan and Islam. President Nursultan Nazarbayev has promoted the republic as a model of spiritual tolerance, inter-faith dialogue, and a meeting place of various religions. To that end, his government has initiated regular meetings with representatives of religious denominations, and these gatherings evolved into the Congress of World and Traditional National Religions held in Kazakhstan. Nazarbayev also pioneered the idea of the “Palace of Nations,” envisioned as a global center for religious and inter-ethnic dialogue. The construction of the palace began in 2004 and a new Temple of Peace and Harmony—housing a mosque, an Orthodox church, a synagogue and a Buddhist temple in a single complex—was inaugurated two years later.³⁵ The World Forum of Spiritual Culture is another project launched by the government and aimed at fostering spirituality and strengthening dialogue between diverse cultures of the modern world.³⁶ Human rights groups, however, have lambasted these initiatives for being engineered “in Soviet style top-down fashion” and being intended “for foreigners.”³⁷

Kazakhstan’s constitution adopted in 1995 enshrines the principle of the separation of state and religion. Based on this principle, religious education is prohibited in public schools, and in 2016 Kazakhstan adopted a law banning the hijab in schools across the country.³⁸ To prevent attempts to politicize Islam, activity by political organizations on a religious basis is legally forbidden in Kazakhstan, and religious political parties are unconstitutional.

Until the early 2000s, Kazakhstan carried out limited measures aimed at countering religious extremism and terrorism. Following 9/11 and intensified regional counterterrorism cooperation, Kazakhstan’s government reinvigorated its national counterterrorism policy. To tackle the threat of violent Islamism, in late 2003 the KNB established an Anti-Terrorism Center, which coordinates counterterrorist and counter-extremist activities of various state bodies. The Center also serves as a liaison between Kazakhstan’s counterterrorism agencies and similar structures abroad. The Center has administered multiple counterterrorism training exercises, conferences and symposia throughout the republic. In addition, it has engaged in education and public outreach projects, including regular broadcasting about state counterterrorism activities.³⁹ Kazakhstan’s Ministry of Interior (MVD) created its own training center for combating terrorism and extremism in 2005. Kazakhstan’s National Guard and State Protection Service also have their own special forces. Today, Kazakhstan’s special operation units include *Sunkar* and *Arlan*, both part of the Ministry of Interior; *Kokjal* and *Kalkan*, which are part of the State Protection Service; *Burkit*, which is located within the National Guard; and *Arystan*, which is part of the KNB. Together with

special forces of the Defense Ministry, these units are tasked with fighting terrorism, rescuing hostages, apprehending armed criminals, and guarding vital state installations.⁴⁰ The personnel of Kazakhstan's special forces receive their training from the elite centers of Russia, the U.S., Germany, Israel, and other states.⁴¹

In recent years, the Kazakh government has expanded its counterterrorism activities still further. In September 2009, President Nursultan Nazarbaev signed the law "On Counteracting Legalization (Laundering) of Ill-gotten Proceeds and Terrorist Financing."⁴² This law enhances Kazakhstan's anti-money laundering/combating terrorism financing (AML/CTF) functions, and brings Kazakhstan into compliance with the "40+9" recommendations of the international Financial Action Task Force on Money Laundering (FATF).⁴³ The *1999 Law on Countering Terrorism* is still used as the legal basis for combating terrorism in Kazakhstan today.⁴⁴ In 2008 the Kazakh parliament considered, but did not pass, a new, stricter counterterrorism law.⁴⁵ New amendments seeking to strengthen counterterrorism legislation were brought into the *Oil Majlis* (Kazakhstan's parliament) in September 2016.⁴⁶

Kazakhstan's special operations troops have stepped up their participation in multi-lateral and bilateral joint exercises, as well as their training with militaries and special units of other states. Particularly notable are the joint counterterrorism and military exercises conducted under the umbrella of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) with the participation of the CSTO Rapid Deployment Forces. These include *Grom* (2013-2015), *Interaction* (2009-2015); *Rubezh* (2010-2015); *Tentr-2015*, and *Poisk-2016*, which, for the first time involved reconnaissance units from the participating states. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a six-member security bloc headed by Russia and China, has also been used as a platform for practicing joint counterterrorism responses. The Kazakh government has signed on to a series of agreements dealing with logistical cooperation, and joint efforts to combat the illegal circulation of weapons, ammunition and explosives codified by all members of the SCO member states.⁴⁷ Since 2003, the United States and the United Kingdom have supported an annual joint military exercise named *Steppe Eagle*. Furthermore, Kazakhstan has ratified numerous bilateral treaties with foreign nations, which have expanded counterterrorism coordination with foreign capitals.⁴⁸

Parallel with the intensification of counterterrorism measures, Kazakhstan has stepped up its domestic efforts to control religious practices. As a result, the number of the government audits of religious organizations has increased substantially. The seizures of prohibited literature and print equipment additionally likewise have been on the rise. The state has also increased criminal and administrative responsibility for certain types of activities associated with extremism and terrorism, and strengthened religious regulations. In 2002, the government established criminal liability for the advocacy of terrorism and public incitement to commit an act of terrorism, as well as the establishment or leadership of a terrorist group and participation in its activities.⁴⁹ In 2005, the country's Criminal Code was amended with another article that crimi-

nalized financing of extremism and terrorism. A 2005 extremism law, which applies to religious groups and other organizations, gives the government broad powers in identifying and designating a group as an extremist organization, banning a designated group's activities, and criminalizing membership in a banned organization. HT is prohibited under this law.

In the summer of 2011, citing the need to ensure the freedom of belief and discourage abuses by the country's religious organizations, Kazakhstan's government created an Agency for Religious Affairs. This agency quickly developed a bill on religious activities that Kazakhstan's parliament passed and president signed in October of 2011.⁵⁰ The October 2011 law imposed significant new regulations concerning religion, requiring the dissolution and official registration of existing religious groups in the country, and imposing a ban on prayer in the workplace.⁵¹

In November 2014, Kazakhstan tightened its counter-extremist legislation further by simplifying a procedure for defining a group as terrorist or extremist and confiscating its property. Websites deemed to have extremist or terrorist content have been blocked in the country.⁵² Today, the list of banned terrorist and extremist organizations released by the office of the Prosecutor General and approved by the Supreme Court includes, among others: the *Islamic Party of Turkestan*; *Hizb ut-Tahrir*; the *Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan* (IMU); al-Qaeda; the Taliban; the Muslim Brotherhood; *Kongra-Gel*, a Kurdish separatist group; *Boz Kurt* (Gray Wolves), a Turkish right-wing group; Pakistan's *Lashkar-e Taiba*; Kuwait's Social Reforms Society; Lebanon's *Asbat al-Ansar*; and a number of Uighur separatist groups.⁵³

The Kazakh government has attempted to balance its restrictions on religious practices and tough anti-extremist measures with several outreach initiatives to its Muslim population. These initiatives have included: a national Program for Ensuring Religious Freedom and Improvement of Relations between the Government and Religions, which is aimed at "increasing the stability of the religious situation" and preventing religious extremism through education and government-sponsored media inserts;⁵⁴ conferences; roundtables and seminars on preventing religious extremism for students and youth;⁵⁵ and a strengthening of state control over both missionaries and the distribution of religious information.⁵⁶

Kazakhstan's government has used other measures to attempt to discourage youth recruitment into extremist organizations. These measures include initiatives to "re-educate" young people whose religious leanings concern their parents or teachers, public forums dedicated to discussing distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable religious beliefs, and a large-scale program of internet monitoring to censor extremist materials online. The government has also sought to combat extremism by opening a large government-run mosque in Astana, shutting down religious facilities with reported links to extremism, and screening Army recruits for their religious beliefs.⁵⁷ In 2013, the government announced plans to launch an educational website

called e-ISLAM in hopes of supplanting the websites of other independent Islamic organizations.⁵⁸ Recognizing the growing danger of Islamist radicalization of the Kazakh youth and seeking greater participation of the civil society groups in preventing extremist activities in the country, President Nazarbayev created a separate Ministry of Religious Affairs and Civil Society in September of 2016.⁵⁹

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