KAZAKHSTAN

Quick Facts

Population: 19,091,949 (July 2020 est.)

Area: 2,724,900 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Kazakh (Qazaq) 68%, Russian 19.3%, Uzbek 3.2%, Ukrainian 1.5%, Uighur 1.5%, Tatar 1.1%, German 1%, other 4.4% (2019 est.)

GDP (official exchange rate): $159.4 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated August 2020)

INTRODUCTION

The issue of violent extremism did not feature prominently for Kazakhstan in the early years following its independence from the USSR in 1991. While the country did experience episodes of violent upheaval before and during the collapse of the Soviet system, these were primarily motivated by ethno-nationalist tensions or economic grievances, not Islamic fundamentalism, and Kazakhstan was spared the effects of radicalization. Kazakh security officials were more concerned with the threat of separatism, viewing violent Islamic extremism as a phenomenon inherent to the country's smaller minority communities concerned with events largely external to the country. Thus, in September 2000, when two police officers were killed in a shooting in Almaty,[1] the attack was quickly attributed to Uyghur extremists whose motivation was ending Chinese rule in nearby Xinjiang and ushering in some form of Islamist government.

Following a wave of terrorist attacks in 2011, however, officials and the public at large became aware of the changing reality of the country.[2] The rise in attacks coincided with jihadist organizations beginning to use new media to promote violent rhetoric and ideology, as well as to groom and recruit new followers for their causes. In 2016, another series of deadly attacks raised fears of a further escalation of religiously motivated violence within the country.[3] Authorities reacted with stricter controls over religious institutions and harsher counterterrorism measures, a response reminiscent of the approach of neighboring states. Yet attacks have persisted, and growing economic disparity has fueled anger and disaffection within the country, especially among young people. Issues like the repatriation of returnees from Syria and Iraq, as well as widespread public anger over the counterterrorism policies of neighboring China, where an extensive incarceration program has swept up ethnic Kazakhs, have further complicated policy responses.

Islamist Activity

Despite speculation in the late Soviet period that conditions were ripe for an Islamist awakening that would challenge the existing system,[4] by and large the Central Asian republics proved reluctant to sever connections with Moscow and remained wary of Islamist currents in the years that followed the USSR's collapse. This is not to say that homegrown Islamists were not present in the region; in both the lawless Ferghana Valley and in Tajikistan's destructive civil war, militant groups were able to significantly challenge the post-independence *status quo*. But the widespread uprising of pious Muslims that some had feared would accompany the withdrawal of communist rule and usher in a period of instability failed to materialize. Nevertheless, one group, Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT, or "Party of Liberation") entered Central Asia early in the post-independence period, and would come to play an important role in laying the foundations for regional Islamist activity thereafter.

It is noteworthy that most attacks within Kazakhstan to date have targeted institutions representing state power; namely, the police, military or intelligence services. In recent years, these incidents appear to be motivated by a desire to spark a broader uprising, no doubt capitalizing on popular resentment of the government. And while in several cases civilians appear to have been caught in the crossfire, spectacular attacks on churches or synagogues have not taken place. Moreover, since 2016, no instances of Islamist-related violence have occurred in Kazakhstan.

Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT, or "Party of Liberation")

HuT promotes an Islamic constitution that calls for the unity of Muslim people under the rule of a *caliphate*. The organization boasts a sophisticated media strategy and a non-violent platform that has facilitated transnational activity.[5] With the collapse of the secular order promoted under the USSR and the emergence of newly independent Muslim majority states, HuT saw an opportunity to win over followers and embed itself in a new region of the world that had long proven inaccessible.[6] Thus, the 1990s saw the intrusion of the Jordanian-origin movement into the "post-Soviet space," where it previously had enjoyed little purchase.

HuT's presence, and its practice of using secret cells to invite receptive sympathizers into its ranks, alarmed authorities in Central Asia in general, and Kazakhstan in particular. By 1998, the group had established itself in southern Kazakhstan, along the country's border with Uzbekistan, and begun publishing leaflets advocating for a dissolution of national borders, attacking Kazakhstan's constitutional order, and calling for currency reforms.[7] However, the group's presence was not significant, *per se*; analysis reveals no more than several hundred members, most of whom primarily distributed leaflets in the southern part of the country. The organization was formally banned in 2005.

The group's non-violent philosophy would soon be outpaced by the battlefield success of ISIS in the Middle East. This, combined with the rise of other, more militant Islamist groups, as well as an aggressive response by the authorities, meant that, by the mid-2010s, HuT as a movement had essentially ceased to exist in Kazakhstan. The most recent sign of what might be considered a "formal" HuT presence in Kazakhstan came in 2014, when five adherents were arrested by state authorities.[8]

Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)

While the extent of HuT activities in, and impact on, Central Asia remains hotly debated to this day,[9] another group that gained prominence during the same time period came to embody Central Asian leaders' fears of Islamist agitation. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU),[10] a militant organization from the Ferghana Valley, was driven out of Uzbekistan, and embedded in the chaotic Tajik civil was for much of the 1990s, before withdrawing to Afghanistan. Prior to doing so, however, the IMU showcased its ability to take advantage of the complex yet porous borders in former Soviet Central Asia to launch a series of raids in both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.[11]

Once in Afghanistan, the IMU would become intertwined with the Taliban in the latter's efforts to

consolidate power over the country. Central Asian fighters serving alongside the Taliban were swept up in the fighting with U.S. forces and their allies in 2001. Those who survived fled Afghanistan and the remnants of the IMU escaped into western Pakistan's mountainous Waziristan region, where they reconstituted themselves and forged links with more internationally oriented *jihadist* organizations such as al-Qaeda.[12] A legacy of communist education meant that fighters raised in the USSR had comparatively high technical proficiency and at least some military training. Perhaps more importantly, economic uncertainties caused by the disruption of Soviet-era supply lines meant that labor migration was taking hold in the home region of IMU members. Propaganda videos produced in the mid-2000s in Pakistan represent an early attempt at specialization and the creation of a "pan-Turkic" niche that would bind Central Asian extremism to far flung diaspora communities.[13]

The prevailing notion in Kazakhstan was that differences in traditional religious practices and a more Russified population base provided less favorable circumstances for the growth of extremism. Nonetheless, authorities remained focused on communities near the country's borders with Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, specifically in Almaty and Shymkent. By the mid-2000s, a growing number of labor migrants were headed not only for Russia and Ukraine, but also to Kazakhstan in search of better wages. There was mounting concern that the IMU was targeting members of these diaspora communities to recruit operatives, build supply lines, and gain notoriety by carrying out attacks.[14]

At the height o fits power, the IMU's membership numbered about 3,000 militants, although that cohort rapidly fragmented along a criminal-ideological axis.[15] The group was nonetheless able to significantly affect local political dynamics for a number of years, until it dispersed and its remaining active elements were absorbed by the Islamic State in Afghanistan in 2015.[16]

Violent extremist organizations

Over the past two decades, Kazakhstan has also been the site of activity by a number of smaller, less prominent Islamist extremist groups, which have sought to destabilize the state and promote their own ideological agendas in the Central Asian republic.

One such organization is Jund al-Khilafah (JaK – not to be mistaken with an Algerian insurgent group of the same name), which emerged in November 2011 with online videos claiming responsibility for a series of disruptive attacks in the country and condemnations of the Kazakh government's policies.[17] The attacks in question took place in western Kazakhstan over the course of several months, and included a May suicide bombing at the local branch office of the National Security Committee in Aktobe[18] and the October detonation of two explosive devices in Atyrau.[19] Boralday Village, a northern suburb of Almaty, also become the scene of violence during the year, with a series of shootouts in November and December leaving several JaK militants and security forces dead.[20] Little is known about the continued activities of JaK after 2012, and analysis suggests that the group has not maintained a firm foothold in Kazakhstan.[21]

The disruption caused by JaK, however, has given way to a new threat in more recent times – one posed by the Islamic State. In late 2013, the group began to feature ethnic Kazakhs in its video propaganda material.[22] Initially, however, those videos were confined to stressing the importance of religious struggle in Syria (rather than agitating for disruptive action specifically in Central Asia). However, the group was clearly targeting Russians and Kazakhs for recruitment and mobilization, and interviews and other video material were produced in Russian and Kazakh with Arabic subtitles. Critically, they include a few shots of children undergoing religious education, a theme to which IS propagandists would return. In November 2014, a much more professional video would appear this time centering on the religious and military training of school aged Kazakh children.[23] Although Kazakh authorities moved quickly to block the video, the juxtaposition of young children with extremist religious theory and military style training likely was intended to tap into the resentments and sympathies of older Kazakhs who had been denied access spirituality in their youth. Yet another video, released in January 2015, purportedly showing a Kazakh child executing Russian agents who had attempted to infiltrate IS.[24]

These videos were followed by concrete military action, and Kazakhstan experienced an uptick in violence in 2016, again in its western reaches. That June, a group of men stormed hunting supply stores in Aktobe to arm themselves before unsuccessfully assaulting a National Guard installation and a police checkpoint, killing three civilians and three guard officers in the process.[25] In July 2016, a lone gunmen shot and killed eight police officers and two civilians in Almaty before being apprehended.[26] Kazakh officials indicated that the attackers in both incidents were linked to the same cell, and had been influenced by Islamic State propaganda that was then circulating.[27]

It should be noted that the upticks in violence in 2011 and 2016 coincided with domestic political turmoil. In 2011, economic woes sparked demonstrations that focused mainly on the oil producing western part of the country,[28] with a state of emergency being declared following deadly clashes in the town of Zhanaozen.[29] Similarly, in 2016, efforts to change the country's land tenure laws led to protests that were especially potent in Aktobe and Atyrau.[30] While it would be a mistake to conflate upsurges of popular anger with the pathologies of extremist attacks, the timing would suggest that feelings of disenfranchisement may serve as a catalyst for violent extremism.

Between 2016 and 2020, Kazakhstan witnessed a lull in Islamist activity, but that relative calm has been broken in recent months. In March 2020, for example, the National Security Committee indicated that it had apprehended a suspected bomber who had allegedly been planning to carry out a terrorist attack on behalf of IS within Kazakhstan.[31] This was the first incident of extremist terrorism in the country since 2016.[32] In July, another attack by militants left ten people dead in Almaty.[33] All told, since 2014, according to various estimates, roughly 800-1,000 Kazakhs have traveled to Syria to fight for the Islamic State or other *jihadist* groups.[34]

Islamism and Society

Many Kazakhs, both officials and civilians, are quick to emphasize that the country's religious history sets the country apart from other Muslim majority areas. A brand of folk-Islam has long been practiced in the region, and is more tolerant of divergent religious or cultural practice.[35] Yet, since the country's independence from the Soviet Union, there has been a noted uptick in popular interest in religion, and a concomitant turn towards more strict interpretation of Islamic thought.[36] As in other parts of former Soviet Central Asia, increasing interest in religion is especially pronounced among young people who have no direct recollection of ideologically driven state atheism and whose education and professional aspirations are deeply tied to the post-Soviet period.

Since the fall of the Islamic State's physical *caliphate* in 2019, the Kazakh government has been confronted with a novel problem: that of managing returnees. It has had to balance fears that returnees might bring their training and battlefield experiences back with them to Kazakhstan with the need to maintain humanitarian commitments to its own citizens. The result was that the Kazakh authorities began a gradual and measured process of repatriating Kazakh citizens and their children from Syria. Dubbed "Zhusan," the operation brought back a total of 595 citizens, some 400 of whom were children, over the course of 2019.[37] Virtually all of the adult men and a handful of the women were charged with terrorist offenses and handed prison sentences, while the rest of the returnees were initially placed in a special deradicalization center in the western Kazakh city of Aqtau as part of what is likely to be a long-term reintegration and observation program.[38]

A significant portion of Kazakhstan's population is comparatively young; almost 40% of the country's total population of 19 million is under the age of twenty-five.[39] As a result, concerns that disaffected youth could become a prime target for radicalization remain prevalent.[40] Returnees from Syria and Iraq could conceivably become a focal point for radicalization, especially if economic growth fails to keep up with the expanding population. This is not to say that it is likely returnees might seek to recreate the

conditions they had lived under in Iraq and Syria, but rather that the same factors that had originally induced hundreds of Kazakhs to travel to territories controlled by IS could still persist within the country, and might be exacerbated by returning radicals. Concerns over the potential for continued radicalization may also explain the efforts by the country's government to not only keep a close eye on returnees (even minors) from the Middle East, but also to attempt to capture the narrative of Islamism-inspired emigration. For instance, while IS propaganda videos emphasized the desire of Kazakh parents to expose their children to fundamentalist teaching, the government has been keen to highlight that emigration from Kazakhstan to conflict locations victimizes women and children, who make up the bulk of returnees.

One additional factor shaping popular perceptions of Islam and society in Kazakhstan has been China's large-scale effort to incarcerate and reeducate Muslim in its neighboring province of Xinjiang. While the Chinese government maintains that it is pursuing a large-scale campaign to prevent radicalization through what it terms "vocational training," the international community has been increasing critical of the mass incarceration of minority groups. Ethnic Kazakhs have been among those affected by Beijing's efforts; although only a small proportion of the overall population, ethnic Kazakhs living in Xinjiang appear to have been especially hard hit, with much of the testimony about the treatment of minorities in camps coming from interviews with this cohort.[41]

Islamism and the State

Like the other former Soviet republics of Central Asia, Kazakhstan inherited a strongly secular state tradition. This legacy of *laicism*, combined with regional anxieties over fundamentalist agitation and the experiences of attacks in 2011 and 2016, has meant that Kazakh authorities have actively sought to mitigate the potential influence of political Islam in the country in recent years.

Notably, Kazakhstan's generally tolerant religious traditions have been reflected in the more relaxed stance of authorities toward radical Islamist activity – especially as compared to its regional neighbors. Even following the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the ensuing U.S.-led campaign to dislodge the Taliban from Afghanistan, Kazakhstan's government remained comparatively unconcerned about the prospect of attacks at home. This, in turn, made the violence of 2011, and to a lesser extent of 2016, more of a shock to the government and population.

Beginning in 2008, the Kazakh state was already in the process of gradually adopting counterterrorism legislation. The country's special forces received specialized training in how to respond to terror incidents, taking part in exercises with their American, Russian, Chinese and Israeli counterparts. The adoption of new counterterrorism statues was discussed in the *Mazhlis,* Kazakhstan's lower house of parliament, though they were ultimately not passed. In 2009, the country adopted new legislation to help fight money laundering and disrupt terrorist financing network. Following the wave of attacks in the summer of 2016, coupled with the realization that hundreds of Kazakhs had travelled to Iraq and Syria, the *Mazhlis* adopted provisions to strip Kazakhs convicted of terrorist offenses of their citizenship.[42]

Membership in several security-oriented bodies, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), have provided Kazakhstan's security forces with the opportunity to participate in joint counterterrorism exercises. Over the past decade, Kazakhstan has gradually increased its involvement in these drills and expanded cooperation under the auspices of the CSTO and SCO through intelligence-sharing measures and the implementation of cooperative policies designed to limit the potential availability of weapons, explosives, and potentially harmful chemicals.

The Kazakh government has also introduced domestic policies aimed at tackling the root causes of fundamentalist violence. Authorities have taken greater interest in the practices of religious organizations operating within the country, monitoring the circulation of prohibited literature and the activities of congregations. Educational institutions were quick to adopt regulations banning the wearing of *hijabs* in

classrooms,[43] though this did not go unchallenged.[44] Similarly the Ministry for Religious Affairs and Civil Society moved to introduce new amendments to the country's legislation in an effort distance destructive "religious movements" from mainstream practice.[45]

One way in which this renewed emphasis on prevention and deradicalization has become embedded in Kazakhstan's policies is the implicit shift in stance toward Kazakhs who had travelled abroad seen in the "Zhusan" operations. While the initial official impulse may have been to insulate the country from individuals who had traveled abroad to join IS, Kazakh authorities soon began fine-tuning this approach. Returnees brought back to Kazkahstan through the Zhusan Program are subject to extensive monitoring by the government. They receive counseling from specially trained clerics and psychologists before being gradually reintegrated into their home communities through family networks. Children, who make up the majority of returnees, are subject to educational assessments in preparation for their further incorporation into the general student population, while adults are subject to extensive background checks.

By identifying and repatriating its citizens from Syria and Iraq, Nur-Sultan was able to further its understanding of the drivers of radicalization in Kazakhstan and work to actively shape a national deradicalization program. While a desire to emphasize traditional community-based religious practices as an alternative to violent extremism is nothing new, and the rehabilitation program for returnees focuses primarily on women and children (as most adult males have been charged with terrorist offenses), the deradicalization program now underway may well represent an important evolution of this policy.

Unlike the other former republics of Soviet Central Asia, however, the economic topography of Kazkahstan is such that outward labor migration is limited. Rather, it has become a destination for labor migrants, known regionally as *Gastarbeiter*. Much like in Russia, a majority of these immigrants are employed in construction and subject to poor working and living conditions. However, the absence of international sanctions and comparatively more relaxed nationalist politics means that labor migrants from the southern republics are less exposed to violence and social exclusion than are their counterparts in Russia.[46] Moreover, linguistic and cultural affinity between Turkic groups serve to ease potential tensions.

Nevertheless, the same currents that shape Islamist thought in Russian language social media also resonate among this subset of Kazakhstan's population. Rather than travel abroad for the purposes of wage labor, many young Kazakhs go abroad to study at universities overseas. This has prompted fears that young men studying at Middle Eastern or European universities, removed from the tempering influence of the mainstream clergy or their parents, might be targeted in radicalization campaigns. One way in which the Kazakhstan's authorities seek to mitigate the threat of radicalization through educational institutions abroad is to partner with counterpart facilities that emphasize "genuine knowledge" of Islam.[47] The Nur Mubarak Egyptian University of Islamic Culture in Almaty, for example, draws upon a Middle Eastern knowledge base by inviting PhD students from Al-Azhar University in Cairo to serve as guest lecturers.[48]

The Kazakh government has been reluctant to join North American and European criticism of Beijing's purported counterterrorism push in Xinjiang, preferring a cautious approach designed not to alienate China and ideally secure the release of its citizens from detention centers. Yet while Nur-Sultan has taken a muted stance, discouraging journalists and activists from drawing overt attention to the matter, domestic pressure on the government to act on behalf of Kazakh being persecuted in China has mounted steadily. The case of Sayragul Satybau, a Chinese citizen from the Kazakh minority who was illegally resident in Kazakhstan to avoid having to return to a reeducation camp in which she held a teaching position in Xinjiang, speaks to the popular anger over the treatment of ethnic Kazakhs under the auspices of an ostensible counter-terrorism scheme. The court presiding over Satybau's case, whose testimony received widespread attention in Kazakhstan, would ultimately decline to deport her to China, possibly motivated by a desire not to further inflame the anti-Chinese sentiments which have been growing in the country in recent years.[49]

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46. This is not to say that virulent nationalism is absent in Kazakhstan or not a problem for the authorities. Both Russian and Kazakh speaking groups have been perpetrators of violence. A key distinction, however, arises from the manner in which the two states interact with nationalist sentiment; while Moscow can boost its legitimacy by making recourse to nationalist appeals, Nursultan/Astana has historically needed to be far more circumspect in negotiating the often complex relationship between its Kazakh and Russian populations.
47. Ksenia Bondal, "Kazakhstan looks to spiritual education system to stem youth radicalisation," *Central Asia News*, May 6, 2019, https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2019/05/06/feature-01
48. Ibid.
49. Catherine Putz, "Kazakhstan and the Xinjiang Problem," *The Diplomat*, September 11, 2018, https://thediplomat.com/2018/09/kazakhstan-and-the-xinjiang-problem/