

American Foreign Policy Council

KAZAKHSTAN

QUICK FACTS

Population: 15,460,484

Area: 2,724,900 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Kazakh (Qazag) 53.4%, Russian 30%, Ukrainian 3.7%, Uzbek 2.5%, German 2.4%, Tatar 1.7%, Uyghur 1.4%, other 4.9%

Religion: Muslim 47%, Russian Orthodox 44%, Protestant 2%, other 7%

Government Type: Republic; authoritarian presidential rule, with little power outside the executive branch

GDP (official exchange rate): \$108.3 billion

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated June 2010)



Historically, the government of Kazakhstan has argued that there were few terrorists on its soil. This position, however, began to change in the early 2000s, driven by a growing appreciation of the asymmetric threat posed by terrorism and religious extremism to the security and stability of the Kazakh state. While there are numerous reports of terrorism in Russia and throughout most of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), it is hard to come across similar news from Kazakhstan. The casual observer could easily get the impression that Kazakhstan is “an oasis of security” in the former USSR, devoid of extremists or terrorists. But this first impression is misleading, as Kazakhstan is not immune from internal threats, nor does it have a guarantee against regional extremist spillovers¹, as evidenced by ongoing volatility in the Fergana Valley and beyond.

Kazakhstan's national leadership and government, however, have combined multi-ethnic and multi-confessional tolerance with the tough pursuit of extremism.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

In the two decades since its independence from the USSR, Islamism has been imported into the Republic of Kazakhstan along three principal routes. The first is from neighboring China, and the long-running Uighur separatist campaign in the autonomous Xinjiang region. The second is from the notoriously unstable Fergana Valley to Kazakhstan's south, stretching between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. And the third is driven by the global Islamist movement and its vanguard in Central Asia, Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami (Islamic Party of Liberation).

The most recent terrorist attack in Kazakhstan happened as long ago as 2000, when two police officers were shot dead in Almaty. The Uighur Liberation Organization (currently known as the East Turkistan Liberation Organization), which advocates an independent Turkistan, is suspected of having perpetrated the incident.² The attack, though comparatively minor in terms of lethality, was symbolically significant; while Kazakhstan has mostly been used as a transit territory for radical organizations acting against the governments of Uzbekistan, China, and Russia, the incident indicated that Kazakhstan had shifted from being a mere waypoint for Islamist activity to an actual target for extremists.³

According to Kazakhstan's Ministry of the Interior, a number of foreign religious organizations, among them Tablighi Jamaat, Sulaymaniyah, and Nurshyla now operate in Kazakhstan, and some of their missionaries spread "destructive ideas among the masses."⁴ Of these, arguably the most prominent is Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami (HuT), a clandestine, cadre-based radical Islamist political organization that operates in 40 countries. With headquarters currently believed to be in London, HuT's goals are *jihad* against America and the replacement of existing political regimes with a caliphate (*Khilafah* in Arabic), a theocratic dictatorship based on *sharia* (Islamic religious law). The model for HuT is the "righteous" caliphate, the mil-

itaristic Islamic state of the 7th and 8th centuries ruled by Prophet Muhammad and his four successors.⁵ A number of Western experts believe HuT to be first and foremost a political organization, and secondarily a religious one.⁶ Its goal is to work covertly with opposition elements in various countries, and ultimately to eliminate the ruling secular government and establish the caliphate there.⁷

In Kazakhstan, HuT was first detected in 1998 in the country's south. At that time, an illegal distribution of leaflets and brochures calling for change in the constitutional system and the establishment of the caliphate was intercepted by local authorities. HuT was not formally banned in Kazakhstan until March 2005.⁸

In late 2006, Kazakh and Kyrgyz authorities launched a joint operation to eliminate the HuT "analytical center" in Central Asia, dismantling routes that were used to deliver propaganda materials with extremist content and financing from abroad.⁹ As a result of the operation two key HuT leaders were arrested. Uzbek resident Otabek Muminov, the leader of the HuT information-analytical center, was detained and extradited to Uzbekistan. Mahamat-Yusuf Mamasadykov, the head of the organization's headquarters for Central Asia, was arrested in Jalalabad, Kyrgyzstan. Investigations revealed that he had been a key figure in forming the underground structure of HuT in Kazakhstan in 2002-2004.¹⁰ HuT's existing network of cells was thereby dismantled in Kazakhstan and neighboring countries. The synchronized operation is known to have confiscated computers, over 25,000 pamphlets, dozens of religious extremist books and advanced printing equipment during the operation.¹¹

Thereafter, in August 2007, five activists of the organization were arrested in the town of Janaozen, where the party had set up a cell in 2006. In the raid, law enforcement confiscated computers, CDs, magazines and brochures and over 400 leaflets. Also that year, 30 HuT leaders and activists were put on trial in Karaganda.¹²

In 2008, the majority of the 41 criminal cases on extremism and terrorism in Kazakhstan were connected to the dissemination of lit-

erature and propaganda by HuT. Police were able to find and confiscate large quantities of literature, CDs, DVDs and other materials, in addition to detaining 21 HuT members in June 2008 in Almaty and in the Southern Kazakhstan.¹³ In 2009, Kazakh authorities arrested and prosecuted two other radical Sunni cells, encompassing a total of eight people.¹⁴ No further authoritative detailed arrest statistics were available for 2009 or 2010. Nevertheless, the organization is believed to remain active in the former Soviet Republic, exploiting a fertile environment for extremist ideas among the impoverished population.¹⁵

In addition, in 2008, nine members of a global radical organization called Jamaat Takfir were detained in Kazakhstan's western region, and subsequently prosecuted.¹⁶ The little-known group, like other Salafist organizations active in the region, appears to advocate mandatory participation in *jihad*, with the objective of establishing a global Islamic state. Unlike others, however, Jamaat is said to advocate the punishment of *takfir*—unbelief or departure from Islam. That concept emerged in Kazakhstan in the mid-1990s, following the mass return of Kazakh citizens studying at religious educational institutions in Bashkortostan and Tatarstan, but the exclusionary idea has created a considerable fissure among Kazakh Muslims.¹⁷

Likewise, al-Jihad al-Islami, an offshoot of the al-Qaeda-affiliated Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), is known to be active in Kazakhstan. It preaches anti-Western ideology and, like the IMU, opposes secular rule in Uzbekistan and aims at establishing a government there based upon Islamic law.¹⁸ Kazakhstan's National Security Committee (KNSC), an internal security service, has alleged that the group—like its parent organization—has ties to al-Qaeda, has cells in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Russia, and has been involved in attacks in Uzbekistan. Little is known about al-Jihad's structure and size at the current time.

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Kazakhstan is a multiethnic country, with a long tradition of tolerance and secularism. The government does not permit religious education in public schools.²⁰ According to the country's 2009 national

census, approximately 65 percent (or 10.5 million) of Kazakhstan's 16.4 million person population identify themselves as Muslim.²¹ The overall majority of the Muslim population is Sunni, of the Hanafi school. Less than one percent of the population professes to be Shafi'i Sunni, or Shi'a, Sufi, and Ahmadi Muslim.²² The highest concentration of practicing Muslims is located in Kazakhstan's southern region, bordering Uzbekistan. As in neighboring states, the number of mosques, churches, and synagogues has grown since the independence. However, the population is somewhat concerned with minority ("non-traditional") religious groups and groups that proselytize.

In 2009, there were 2,308 registered mosques affiliated with the Spiritual Association of Muslims of Kazakhstan (SAMK), and around 70 independent mosques.²³ SAMK is a national organization with close ties to the government, which sometimes pressures unaffiliated *imams* and congregations to affiliate and make their practices more mainstream. It has powerful influence over the practice of Islam in the former Soviet republic, including but not limited to licensing construction of mosques, carrying out background checks on *imams* and the coordination of *Hajj* travels, which involves authorization of travel agencies to provide travel services to Muslim pilgrims bound for Saudi Arabia.²⁴

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Kazakhstan's leadership does not take the Islamist threat lightly. To tackle the terror threat the Kazakh National Security Committee (KNSC, or KNB according to its Russian acronym) established Anti-Terrorist Center in late 2003. A year later, the center disclosed the arrests of over a dozen members of the Islamic Jihad Group/Union of Uzbekistan, shocking many Kazakhs.

In the first half of 2007, Kazakh newspapers reported that HuT members were turning themselves in *en masse*, suggesting massive penetration of the organization by security services. All told, one hundred and forty HuT members deserted the party in six *oblasts* (regions): Almaty, Jambyl, Kyzylorda, Pavlodar, Karaganda and South Kazakhstan. The surrendering HuT members brought with

them more than 3,000 copies of printed materials with extremist content. According to the KNSC press service, 15 former members of the party assisted in the investigation.²⁵

Subsequently, that December, 30 alleged HuT members were sentenced for 18 months to seven years in prison by a district court in Karaganda. They were convicted of participating in “an illegal extremist organization and inciting ethnic and religious enmity.”²⁶ The closed door trials raised protests from human rights activists, who voiced concerns about due process and questionable evidence. They claimed that the government was punishing the defendants for their religious devotion and independence from the state-controlled SAMK.²⁷

In reality, the situation is more complex. While Kazakhstan’s Constitution formally provides for freedom of religion, it also defines the country as a secular state and provides the right to decline religious affiliation. Islamists do not believe in a secular state and do all they can to overthrow it. Activities aimed at overturning the existing constitutional order, especially when violence is used or preached, is subject to law enforcement in all democracies around the world. The question is whether or not these efforts are perceived as legitimate.

The KNSC has characterized the fight against “religious extremism” as a top priority of the country’s internal intelligence service. 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. HuT is prohibited under this law. In 2008, the Islamic Party of Turkistan was added to this list of banned terrorist and extremist organizations by the government of Kazakhstan.²⁸ This list is released by the office of the Prosecutor General and approved by the Supreme Court.²⁹ It is periodically updated and includes, among others: Hizb ut-Tahrir; the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan; 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 Uighur separatist groups.³⁰

The past two years has seen the leadership of Kazakhstan expand its anti-terrorism activities still further. In September 2009, President Nursultan Nazarbaev signed the law "On Counteracting Legalization (Laundering) of Ill-gotten Proceeds and Terrorist Financing."³¹ This law enhances Kazakhstan's anti-money laundering/combatting terrorism financing (AML/CTF) functions, and brings Kazakhstan into compliance with the international Financial Action Task Force on Money Laundering (FATF) "40+9" Recommendations.³² The 1999 Law on Countering Terrorism is still used as the legal basis for combating terrorism in Kazakhstan today.³³ In 2008 the Kazakh parliament considered, but did not pass, a new, stricter counterterrorism law.³⁴

This legal framework has paved the way for growing counterterrorism activity at home, and greater Kazakh cooperation with international organizations. In addition to the cases mentioned in the above, counterterrorism actions have included a series of detentions and court prosecutions in 2008-2010, including:

- The February 2008 sentencing of two members of an Islamic extremist group to 12 years in prison, and six others to nine years imprisonment, for plotting terrorist attacks during the autumn of 2006;³⁵
- The March 2008 sentencing of 15 members of a terrorist group to prison terms ranging from 11 to 19 years by a court in Shymkent. The prisoners were detained in April 2007 on charges of organizing terrorist acts against the local office of the KNSC.³⁶
- The November 2008 detention of an Uzbek citizen wanted for membership in religious-extremist, separatist, and fundamentalist organizations in the southern Zhambyl District of Almaty. His extradition to Uzbekistan is currently pending.³⁷
- The April 2009 sentencing of five HuT members "inflaming social, ethnic, racial, and religious hostility" and for creating and participating in "illegal public and other unions."³⁸ The closed door trials took place in Almaty and Taldykorgan.

- The September 2009 charging of six members of a radical Islamist group with terrorism, illegal acquisition of weapons and ammunition, the involvement of minors in criminal activity, violence and distribution of propaganda materials by a court in the city of Kandyahash in Aktyubinska oblast. The sentences varied from ten to seventeen year terms.³⁹
- The November 2009 conviction of two suspects of propagating terrorism, inciting public to commit acts of terrorism and creating and directing a terrorist group called “Al Farabi” by a court in Astana. The two men, who happen to be cousins, were each sentenced to eight years in prison. Their appeal was denied on February 12, 2010.⁴⁰

In 2008, Kazakhstan also passed five interagency laws regulating the counterterrorism efforts of public bodies, and carried on 148 interagency counterterrorism training programs.⁴¹ According to the KNSC, the level of activity was not atypical; there were 63 anti-terrorism trainings in the first half of 2009 alone.⁴²

On the international level, Kazakhstan in 2008 approved treaties expanding counterterrorism cooperation with Slovakia and the United Arab Emirates.⁴³ Kazakhstan and China have likewise reached an understanding, encapsulated in a joint communiqué issued in October 2008, to strengthen exchange of information and coordinate actions to counteract terrorism, religious extremism, separatism, smuggling, illegal drug trafficking, transnational crime, and illegal migration.⁴⁴ At the head of states meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in August 2008, the Kazakh representative signed on to a series of agreements dealing with logistical cooperation, joint counterterrorism exercises by member states of the SCO, and joint efforts to combat the illegal circulation of weapons, ammunition and explosives.⁴⁵ As the result of these framework documents, Kazakhstan will host the anti-terror drills known as “Peace Mission 2010,” which involve anti-terrorist command and staff exercises of the SCO member-states, in September 2010.⁴⁶

Given Kazakhstan’s role as a location for the production of Soviet

nuclear weapons during the Cold War, the government has also been a proponent of nuclear non-proliferation, and experts in this area are concerned about the threat posed by nuclear terrorism. To this end, in June 2008 Kazakhstan hosted the training exercise “Anti-Atom Terror,” which was attended by more than 15 partner nations from the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism.⁴⁷ More than 900 military, intelligence, law enforcement, and security personnel from Kazakhstan were involved in this field exercise, which took place at the Institute of Nuclear Physics in Ala-Tau.⁴⁸

The government has also advanced interfaith dialogue, outlining a Program for Ensuring Religious Freedom and Improvement of Relations between the Government and Religions between 2007 and 2009.⁴⁹ The program delineates plans for “increasing the stability of the religious situation” and preventing religious extremism through education and government-sponsored media inserts. In addition, the program criticizes increasingly active “nontraditional religious groups,” for causing interfaith tension and ignoring existing traditions.⁵⁰ In 2008, Kazakh law enforcement bodies held conferences, round tables and seminars with the participation of authoritative state officials and religious leaders for students and pupils on preventing religious extremism.⁵¹ The program likewise calls for new legislation to augment control over missionaries and the distribution of religious information.⁵²

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