

American Foreign Policy Council

KAZAKHSTAN

QUICK FACTS

Population: 17,736,896

Area: 2,724,900 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Kazakh (Qazag) 63.1%, Russian 23.7%, Uzbek 2.8%, Ukrainian 2.1%, Uyghur 1.4%, Tatar 1.3%, German 1.1%, other 4.5%



Religion: Muslim 70.2%, Christian 26.2% (Russian Orthodox 23.9%, other Christian 2.3%), Buddhist 0.1, Other 0.2%, Atheist 2.8%, Unspecified 0.5%

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

GDP (official exchange rate): \$196.4 billion

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated September 2013)

While Islamist terrorism remains relatively common in Russia and throughout most of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Kazakhstan—a secular, autocratic, Muslim-majority former Soviet Republic—seems to have largely evaded this trend. In fact, the casual observer is often left with the impression that Kazakhstan is “an oasis of security” in the former USSR, devoid of extremism or terrorism. But this impression is to some degree misleading, as Kazakhstan is not immune from internal threats, nor is it insulated from extremism spilling over from neighboring countries¹, as evidenced by the ongoing volatility in the Fergana Valley and beyond. Since the early 2000s, the Kazakh government increasingly appreciated the asymmetric threat posed by terrorism and religious extremism. In response, the country’s national leadership and government have, with some degree of success, combined multi-ethnic and multi-confessional tolerance with zero tolerance for religious extremism. In September 2011, President Nursultan

Nazarbayev signed a series of amendments giving the government of Kazakhstan tighter control over religious organizations. Some in the U.S. government believe there was a correlation between the changes and attacks on the country's security forces in late 2011.² However, as the U.S. withdraws its forces from Afghanistan and neighboring countries remain weak or oppressive, the long-term threat of Islamist activities in Central Asia will continue and possibly grow.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

In the two-plus decades since it gained independence from the USSR, Islamist ideologies have been imported into the Republic of Kazakhstan along three principal routes. The first is from neighboring China, springing from the long-running separatist campaign in Xinjiang province (which borders Kazakhstan), where parts of the Muslim Uighur ethnic group, which opposes Chinese rule, underwent radicalization. The second avenue, represented by the Islamic Movement of Turkestan, is from the notoriously unstable Fergana Valley to Kazakhstan's south, stretching across the tri-border region between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The third avenue stems from the global Islamist movement and its vanguard in Central Asia, *Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami* (Islamic Party of Liberation).

Terrorist attacks in Kazakhstan have been occurring since at least 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 having perpetrated that incident.³ The attack, though comparatively minor in terms of lethality, was symbolic; 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.⁴

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."⁵ Of these, arguably the most prominent is *Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami* (HT), a clandestine, cadre-based radical Islamist political organization that operates in 40 countries. Though ostensibly non-violent in nature, there are indications that HT's ultimate goals include a 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 HT is the "righteous" caliphate, the militaristic Islamic state of the 7th and 8th centuries ruled by Prophet

Muhammad and his four successors.⁶ A number of Western experts believe HT to be first and foremost a political organization, and only secondarily a religious one.⁷ Its goal, they say, is to work covertly with opposition elements in various countries and ultimately to eliminate the ruling secular government and establish a caliphate there.⁸

In Kazakhstan, HT 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. HT was formally banned in Kazakhstan in March 2005.⁹

In late 2006, Kazakh and Kyrgyz authorities launched a joint operation to eliminate the HT "analytical center" in Central Asia, dismantling routes that were used to deliver propaganda materials with extremist content and financing from abroad.¹⁰ As a result of the operation, two key HT leaders were arrested. 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 arrested in Jalalabad, Kyrgyzstan. Investigations revealed that he had been a key figure in forming the underground structure of HT in Kazakhstan in 2002-2004.¹¹ HT's existing network of cells was thereby dismantled in Kazakhstan and neighboring countries. The synchronized operation resulted in the confiscation of computers, over 25,000 pamphlets, dozens of religious extremist books and advanced printing equipment.¹² Thereafter, in August 2007, five activists of the organization were arrested in the town of Janaozen (Zhanaozen), where the party had set up a cell the year before. In the raid, law enforcement confiscated computers, CDs, magazines and brochures and over 400 leaflets. Also that year, 30 HT leaders and activists were put on trial in Karaganda.¹³

In 2008, the majority of the 41 criminal cases on extremism and terrorism in Kazakhstan were connected to the dissemination of literature and propaganda by HT. Police were able to find and confiscate large quantities of literature, CDs, DVDs and other materials, in addition to detaining 21 HT members in June 2008 in Almaty and in Southern Kazakhstan.¹⁴ In 2009, Kazakh authorities arrested and prosecuted two other radical Sunni cells, encompassing a total of eight people.¹⁵ No further authoritative detailed arrest statistics were available in the years after. Nevertheless, the organization is believed to remain active in Kazakhstan, exploiting a fertile environment for extremist ideas, especially among the impoverished population.¹⁶

In addition, in 2008, nine members of a global radical organization called *Jamaat Takfir* were detained in Kazakhstan's western region, and subse-

quently prosecuted.¹⁷ 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 physical punishment of *takfir*—unbelief or departure from Islam punishable by death or amputation. That intolerant concept, known since the early Middle Ages, emerged for the first time 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 considerable fissures among Kazakh Muslims.¹⁸

In addition, groups labeled as Quranis and Salafis (Wahhabism is prohibited in Kazakhstan) have established small movements in Kazakhstan. Quranis are conservative Islamists who consider the Quran to be the “exclusive authoritative source of divine revelation” and whose goal is to return Islam to its original form.¹⁹ In Kazakhstan, their ideology includes the rejection of deeply embedded practices such as ancestor worship, which are central to Kazakh society. 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 it is being reinforced by missionaries from Arab countries 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 Saudi Arabian Kingdom in Almaty still provides education for Salafis.²⁰

One troubling phenomenon in Kazakhstan relates to the spread of religious extremism in the country’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. On their release, these inmates may go on to join extremist organizations. 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.²¹

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 to establish a government there based upon Islamic law.²² 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.

Finally, in recent years Islamic radicals have grown stronger in the country's southern and western regions. In Atyrau, Muslim cemeteries have been defiled by members of an unofficial Kazakh religious organization. Another source of concern is the emergence in northern Kazakhstan of a new pseudo-religious movement called "Ata Joly" ("Road of the Ancestors"). This group, which uses Islam-based faith-healing methods, has been accused of causing serious harm to its followers' mental and physical health and has even been blamed for some cases of suicide. Officially banned in Kazakhstan in January 2009, the movement's activities have since expanded into Russia and Belarus.

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.²³ 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. Despite the official ban, there are cases in which Islam is invoked as a political ideology with a nationalist orientation.

According to the country's most recent national census, carried out in 2009, approximately 65 percent (or 10.5 million) of Kazakhstan's 16.4 million citizens identify themselves as Muslim.²⁴ The overall majority of the Muslim population is Sunni and of the Hanafi school. Less than one percent of the population professes to be Sunni of the Sha'afi school, Shi'a, Sufi, and Ahmadi.²⁵ 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.

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.²⁶ 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 country, 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.²⁷

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

To tackle the threat from Islamist terrorism the Kazakh National Security Committee (KNSC, or KNB according to its Russian acronym) established an Anti-Terrorism 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 HT members were turning themselves in *en masse*, suggesting massive penetration of the organization by security services. All told, one hundred and forty HT members deserted the party in six oblasts (regions): Almaty, Jambyl, Kyzylorda, Pavlodar, Karaganda, and South Kazakhstan. The surrendering HT 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.²⁸

Subsequently, that December, 30 alleged HT members were given sentences of 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.”²⁹ 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.³⁰

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. HT is prohibited under this law. In 2008, the Islamic Party of Turkestan was added to this list of banned terrorist and extremist organizations by the government of Kazakhstan.³¹ The list is released by the office of the Prosecutor General and approved by the Supreme Court. 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.³²

Recent years have seen the Kazakh government 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.”³³ This law enhances Kazakhstan’s anti-money laundering/combating terrorism financing (AML/CTF) functions, and brings Kazakhstan into compliance with the international Financial Action Task Force on Money Laundering (FATF) “40+9” Recommendations.³⁴ The 1999 Law on Countering Terrorism is still used as the legal basis for combating terrorism in Kazakhstan today.³⁵ In 2008 the Kazakh parliament considered, but did not pass, a new, stricter counterterrorism law.³⁶

In the summer of 2011, citing the need to ensure 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 2011.³⁷ 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.³⁸

This legal framework has paved the way for growing counterterrorism activity at home, and greater Kazakh cooperation with international law enforcement organizations. In addition to the cases mentioned in the above, counterterrorism actions have included a series of detentions, court prosecutions, and counterterror operations in recent years, 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 2006.³⁹
- 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.⁴⁰
- 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.⁴¹
- The April 2009 sentencing of five HT members for “inflaming social, ethnic, racial, and religious hostility” and for creating and participating in “illegal public and other unions.”⁴² 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.⁴³

- The November 2009 conviction of two suspects for propagating terrorism, inciting the 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, 2010.⁴⁴
- The September 2011 arrest of 18 people plotting terrorist attacks in Atyrau on the Caspian Sea and 29 people in the Aktau region.⁴⁵
- A July 2011 operation, in connection with May explosions in Aktobe and Astana and July attacks in Shubarshy, leading to the arrest of over 200 suspects.⁴⁶
- A December 2011 police raid that killed five suspected terrorists in Boralday of the Almaty region, who were suspected in the murder of two policemen in the month prior. On December 29, 2011 security forces killed Erik Ayazbayev, the leader of the group suspected in the policemen’s murders.⁴⁷

Kazakhstan continues to work to refine and upgrade its counterterrorism laws. According to the State Department’s 2012 *Country Reports on Terrorism*, this has included “new legislation intended to clearly delineate and regulate the authorities and responsibilities of government agencies in matters of counterterrorism,” the establishment of regional counterterrorism commissions, and the creation of “an automated system of information exchange in order to more effectively implement counterterrorism measures across their borders.”⁴⁸

Kazakhstan’s cooperation with international partners on counterterrorism has also continued and expanded. Treaties signed over the past decade with foreign nations (including Slovakia, China and the United Arab Emirates) have expanded counterterrorism coordination with foreign capitals.⁴⁹ A primary vehicle for this cooperation, by dint of Kazakhstan’s geopolitical position, has been the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), six-member security bloc headed by Russia and China. 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 the SCO member states,⁵⁰ and has hosted regional anti-terror drills in support of the bloc.⁵¹ 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 has hosted military exercises with foreign partners aimed at combatting nuclear

terrorism.⁵²

At home, the Kazakh government has attempted numerous means of outreach to its Muslim population. These have included: a national Program for Ensuring Religious Freedom and Improvement of Relations between the Government and Religions, aimed at “increasing the stability of the religious situation” and preventing religious extremism through education and government-sponsored media inserts⁵³; conferences, round tables and seminars on preventing religious extremism for students and youth⁵⁴; and a strengthening of state control over both missionaries and the distribution of religious information.⁵⁵

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.⁵⁶ 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.⁵⁷ Finally, the Kazakh government has continued its participation in the State Department’s Antiterrorism Assistance Program, through which the country’s senior police officials receive training in skills relevant to combating terrorism and responding to terrorist attacks.⁵⁸

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