

General Situation of Religious Groups, Madhhabs and Contemporary Religious Movements in Kazakhstan

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Abstract

This study examines the historical development of Islam, religious diversity, major Islamic madhhabs and contemporary religious movements in Kazakhstan. The spread of Islam in Kazakhstan began during the eighth century and accelerated after the Battle of Talas, playing a decisive role in shaping the religious and cultural identity of the Kazakh people. The Hanafi school of thought gradually became the dominant religious tradition and has remained the official madhhab of Kazakhstan's Muslim community. The study also investigates the presence and development of other religious traditions, including Orthodox Christianity, Catholicism, Protestantism and Judaism, all of which have contributed to the country's multi-religious character. Historical developments during the Russian imperial and Soviet periods significantly influenced the religious landscape of Kazakhstan, resulting in both religious suppression and subsequent revival after independence. Furthermore, the paper analyses the existence of various Islamic schools and contemporary religious movements in Kazakhstan, particularly the emergence and expansion of Salafism after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The study explores the social, cultural and political challenges associated with these movements, including their impact on traditional religious practices, national customs, social cohesion and state institutions. Special attention is given to the perceived threats posed by radical religious ideologies to the state, society and the traditional values of the Kazakh people. The study concludes that while Kazakhstan has historically maintained religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence among different religious communities, the preservation of the country's traditional Hanafi-Maturidi religious identity remains essential for maintaining social stability, national unity and religious moderation.

Keywords: Kazakhstan, Hanafi School of Thought, Religious Movements, Salafism, Religious Diversity, Central Asia.

1. Historical Development of Islam in Kazakhstan

The rapid spread of Islam in Central Asia and the regions of Kazakhstan began during the eighth century, in the period of the Umayyad Caliph Muawiyah ibn Abi Sufyan (639 - 661). To introduce Islam to these regions, the Arabs organized several military expeditions. The commander of the Islamic armies, Qutaybah ibn Muslim, entered the region of Transoxiana after conquering Azerbaijan and Georgia. He captured Bukhara in 709, Samarkand between 710 and 712 and the cities of Shash (Tashkent) and Farab (Otrar) in 714. In July 751, the Islamic army defeated the Tang Empire of China in the Battle of Talas, which marked a major turning point in the history of the region. The victory at Talas enabled Islam to spread among broader segments of the population in Kazakhstan and played a decisive role in the establishment of Islam in Central Asia.¹

After the Battle of Talas, the Turkic communities living in Southern Kazakhstan had the opportunity to become closely acquainted with Islam. Muslim merchants assumed the responsibility of spreading Islam to Northern and Eastern Kazakhstan. A large number of merchants, shaykhs and imams arrived in the Kazakh steppes from Arab lands and established contacts with the local population. By reciting verses from the Holy Qur'an and delivering sermons, they contributed significantly to the dissemination of Islam.²

The close economic and cultural relations between the peoples of the Kazakh steppes, the tribes of Central Asia and the Volga Tatars also contributed to the spread of Islam. Preachers arriving from Bukhara, Samarkand, Tashkent, Khiva and Turkistan played an influential role in the gradual expansion of Islamic teachings.

The prominent historian N. Nurtazin provides a comprehensive assessment of the process of Islamization in Kazakhstan. According to Nurtazin, the process of Islamization began in Central Kazakhstan during the eighth century and reached its peak during the Karakhanid period between the tenth and twelfth centuries. This process continued with the religious and cultural revival of the Golden Horde and culminated in the emergence of the Kazakh Khanate as a fully developed Muslim state that adopted Islam based on the Hanafi school of Abu Hanifa.

Islam became the dominant religion in the steppe regions of Kazakhstan and these foundations were preserved and transmitted to future generations. Nurtazin emphasizes the decisive role played by Islam in the historical and cultural development of the region. The harmonious integration of Islam with the customs and traditions of the people became one of the most important elements of the cultural identity of the Kazakh Khanate.³

The Kalahandi State was the first state in the region to officially adopt Islam. With the arrival of Islam, urban culture, science, education, trade and the arts experienced significant development. Madrasas and mosques were constructed in Southern Kazakhstan and the Zhenyu region.

The formation and spread of Islam took place in a peaceful manner.

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With the advent of Islam, several distinguished scholars of the Islamic world emerged, including Abu Nasr al-Farabi, Abu Ibrahim Ishaq al-Farabi, Khoja Ahmad Yasawi, Ghulam Uddin al-Jauhari, Muhammad Haydar Dulati and Hussam al-Din al-Saganaki.

During the periods of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, Islam in Kazakhstan was subjected to severe pressure and restrictions. Russian authorities attempted to limit the influence of Islam as much as possible. One of the most extreme examples of this policy was the effort to forcibly baptize the local population. Nevertheless, the people preserved their loyalty to the traditions of their ancestors and transmitted them to subsequent generations.

According to historical records, during the 1960s there were approximately twenty mosques and two madrasas in Turkistan. Before the October Revolution of 1917, there were approximately 200 mosques in the Aktobe region, 269 in the Zhetysu region, 78 in the Bukey Horde, and 15 in Aziz Ata.

In 1921, during the Soviet period, not only Islam but religion in general was regarded as a source of backwardness and obscurantism. State atheism was actively promoted. Religious scholars and mullahs faced persecution, while numerous religious institutions and madrasas were closed. Despite these restrictions, approximately thirty-eight mosques were built during the Soviet era. Before independence, more than sixty mosques existed in Kazakhstan.

In 1990, Kazakhstan separated from the Muslim Religious Administration in Tashkent. During the First Congress of Muslims of Kazakhstan held in Almaty, the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan was established.⁴

The First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, stated:

“We are Muslims and therefore we are Sunnis who follow the Abu Hanifa School of Thought. The path followed by our ancestors is based on national traditions and respect for parents. Therefore, the present generation should honour the traditions of their forefathers by showing respect to Islam, which is the noblest religion in the world. We are proud to be a part of the Islamic Ummah. This is our tradition.”⁵

In the scholarly literature, the spread of Islam in Kazakhstan is generally divided into the following stages: the first stage (eighth–ninth centuries), the second stage (tenth–seventeenth centuries) the third stage (eighteenth–nineteenth centuries), the fourth stage (nineteenth–twentieth centuries), the fifth stage (1971–1991) and the sixth stage, which covers the period following the establishment of independence.

The official madhhab of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan is the Hanafi school of Imam Abu Hanifa, established on the theological foundations of the Maturidi school.

2. Other Religions in Kazakhstan

1. Christianity

Orthodoxy

Orthodox Christianity ranks second after Islam in terms of the number of adherents in Kazakhstan. The Orthodox faith began to spread in the country during the period of the Russian Empire's occupation of the Kazakh Khanate. The first military settlements in the southern regions appeared in Turkistan and Shymkent in 1866. According to official statistics, there are 315 Orthodox communities in Kazakhstan.

Catholicism

Catholic religious philosophy is based on the Holy Scriptures and Sacred Tradition. The history of Catholicism in Kazakhstan dates to the exile of Poles and soldiers to Kazakh territories during the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. The number of Catholics increased due to the settlement of Germans, Poles and Latvians who adhered to the Catholic faith.

The first Catholic church was built in 1970s. The centre of the Catholic Church is located in the Vatican. Approximately 300,000 Catholics live in Kazakhstan. According to official statistics as of January 1, 2011, there were 118 Catholic associations in Kazakhstan of which 79 were re-registered. According to more recent data, this movement has 84 religious associations.

The New Apostolic Church

The New Apostolic Church originated in England in 1832 through movements within the Roman Catholic Church, which were also known as the "Catholic Apostolic" movement. Its principal religious text is the Bible, and the faith has spread to approximately 180 countries.

The New Apostolic Church was officially registered in Kazakhstan in 1991 through the efforts of missionaries. In 2011, forty-seven associations belonging to this organization were officially registered. However, in 2012, thirty-nine associations failed to complete the re-registration process, and only eight associations remained officially registered.

Protestantism

Representatives of the Protestant movement settled in Kazakh territories during the twentieth century. During the 1930s and 1940s, under Stalin's policies of repression, many people were forcibly deported from their homelands.

The history of Protestantism in Kazakhstan includes several denominations and confessional groups, including Lutherans, Mennonites, Baptists, Presbyterians and Evangelical communities.⁶

2. Judaism

The large-scale arrival of Jews in Kazakhstan occurred during the

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period of Stalinist repression (late 1920s – early 1950s), as well as due to the tolerance shown by the Kazakh people toward all ethnic groups, including the Jews. It is known that there were approximately 23,500 Jews in Kazakhstan in 1979 and around 19,000 in 1989.

In 1990, 2,109 Jews emigrated and in 1991, another 1,925 Jews left the country. Approximately half of these emigrants came from Almaty. Although most of the Kazakhstan's Jewish population emigrated after independence, Jewish communities continue to maintain active religious and social activities. The largest Jewish centre of worship in Central Asia, the "Beit Rachel-Chabad Lubavitch" synagogue and religious centre, was opened in Astana in 2004.

Furthermore, Jewish leaders played an important role in the Third Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, held in Astana in 2009. The congress was attended by Israel's Chief Rabbis Yona Metzger and Shlomo Amar, as well as the President of Israel, Shimon Peres. Many Israeli ministers also accompanied the delegation headed by Shimon Peres.

History demonstrates that missionary activities are generally pursued with two objectives: one religious and the other political. The Jewish community of Kazakhstan continues to maintain positive relations with the Kazakh state.⁷

3. Other Madhhabs (Islamic School of Jurisprudence) and Contemporary Religious Movements

Shafi'i School of Thought

The Shafi'i school is mainly represented by Chechen and Ingush immigrants living in Kazakhstan. In 1998, the Chechen community and in 2001, the Ingush community constructed mosques in the city of Almaty.

Hanbali School of Thought

After independence, the Hanbali school gained a certain degree of popularity due to the influence of students who had received religious education in Saudi Arabia. The Salafi/Wahhabi movement is generally regarded as a manifestation of this school.

Maliki School of Thought

There are no significant representatives of the Maliki school in Kazakhstan.

Shi'ism is mainly found among communities of Azerbaijani origin and there is a Shi'i mosque in Almaty.⁸

Religion is one of the most important factors forming the foundation of the state and serves as a key element of internal stability. For centuries, the Kazakh people have lived within the framework of Islam and for more than a thousand years they have practiced the Islamic faith. At the same time, the Kazakh people, who traditionally adhere to the Hanafi school, have not experienced major religious divisions or sectarian conflicts throughout their

history.

Today, however, the number of religious movements that negatively influence society and human consciousness is increasing. Many of these movements remain unfamiliar to the public, while the harmful effects they exert on human consciousness and social life are frequently observed and discussed.

At present, more than 130 ethnic groups live in Kazakhstan in peace and harmony. They share common interests and contribute to social stability. Nevertheless, one of the most urgent contemporary challenges is the increasing number of religious movements that mislead and negatively influence young people.

As a consequence of religious differences, family disputes have increased, resulting in a growing number of divorces. Non-traditional religious organizations sometimes deceive individuals or use them for undesirable purposes. Emotionally vulnerable and psychologically unstable individuals often find it difficult to distinguish between truth and falsehood. Therefore, it is necessary to learn from history and determine an appropriate course for the future.⁹

Salafism/Wahhabism

Salafism/Wahhabism is regarded as a significant challenge to the religious structure of Kazakhstan. Salafis advocate a return to the practices of early Islam and reject certain traditional elements of Kazakh religious culture, such as the visitation of graves and customary prayers associated with local traditions.

Since this movement is perceived as a threat to state institutions and social values, the government has sought to place its activities under control.

Although the Republic of Kazakhstan attempted to maintain a balance in religious affairs after independence, various religious movements continued to operate in the country. Wahhabism was among these movements. Owing to substantial financial support, Salafism gained considerable influence and succeeded in carrying out effective activities.

Generally, knowledge is acquired through study and reading. Recognizing this fact, Salafi groups established publishing houses with attractive and influential names in order to disseminate their ideas and beliefs.

Through these educational institutions and expansionist policies, Wahhabi ideology began to spread into Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Initially, these groups concealed their actual objectives by establishing foundations, religious courses, and Arabic language programs. Through these institutions, they attempted to influence young people and introduce Salafi ideas.

Moreover, by distributing free literature translated into Arabic and Russian, they succeeded in attracting individuals who lacked sufficient religious knowledge.

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In an effort to spread Wahhabi ideology and recruit supporters among the younger generation, special schools were established in various regions. Students at these institutions were provided with scholarships and these schools received considerable attention and support in countries that had experienced religious suppression during the Soviet period.

Students from Kazakhstan also attended these institutions.

During the 1990s, many young people travelled to Muslim countries to study Islamic sciences. Among them, some adopted Salafi ideas. After completing their education and returning to Kazakhstan, they began to propagate these views within their communities.¹⁰

The Russian researcher Aleksandr Ignatenko, in his work *Islam and Politics*, argues that Wahhabism (Salafism) as a religious-political doctrine passed through three major stages in the Islamic world.

During the 1970s, according to this interpretation, United States intelligence agencies used Wahhabism as an ideological weapon against communism. Having attained the status of the official state doctrine in Saudi Arabia, Wahhabism subsequently pursued an expansionist policy and sought to spread its influence to other Arab countries, particularly Egypt, Libya, Palestine and Syria. These efforts are considered to have achieved a certain degree of success.

During the 1980s, to unite various radical groups fighting against Soviet forces in Afghanistan, Wahhabi ideology was promoted. As a result, many fighters from different Muslim countries were sent to Afghanistan to participate in what was described as a struggle against unbelievers. Subsequently, the Taliban movement emerged.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, efforts were made to spread Wahhabism throughout the Central Asian republics and the Caucasus with the aim of destabilizing the internal peace of post-Soviet states. Therefore, armed conflicts and social unrest occurred in regions such as Chechnya, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.¹¹

Threats of Salafism

1. Threats to the State

1. Salafi groups argue that the Republic of Kazakhstan is a state that does not govern according to Islamic law and they claim that obedience to the laws of a non-Islamic or unbelieving state is sinful. Consequently, they oppose the existing state system.
2. They discourage young people from serving in the armed forces of the Republic of Kazakhstan and oppose compulsory military service.
3. They attempt to recruit and direct young people toward participation in jihad, particularly by encouraging them to travel to conflict zones such as Syria.
4. They accuse state institutions of idolatry and regard governmental

structures as illegitimate. Furthermore, they label individuals working within state institutions as unbelievers and encourage people to join international extremist organizations. They also promote hostility toward followers of other religions and toward atheists.

2. Threats to the Traditions and Customs of the Kazakh People

1. They describe traditional prayers and funeral rituals as *shirk* (associating partners with God).
2. They reject the practice of visiting graves and the traditional customs of greeting and honouring elders.
3. They consider the traditional Kazakh custom of a bride showing respect and greeting her father-in-law or mother-in-law as a form of associating partners with God.
4. They discourage or prohibit Muslims from visiting the graves of their deceased parents and relatives.
5. They reject traditional forms of showing respect to elders, including greeting them respectfully with both hands.
6. They oppose the recitation of the Qur'an for deceased relatives.
7. They reject elements of civilization and culture, including folk music and various forms of art.¹²

3. Threats to Social Relations

1. They contribute to divisions within society and create religious polarization.
2. In both rural and urban areas, they cause disputes, conflicts and hostility among Muslims regarding issues related to Islam and religious practices.
3. They frequently come into conflict with imams and recognized religious authorities.
4. They spread mistrust and sow seeds of hatred among members of society.¹³

The First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, addressed the challenge of radical movements such as Wahhabism in his strategic message *Kazakhstan–2050*. He stated:

“In our society, especially among young people, we must strengthen awareness and protection against religious extremism.”

Through this statement, he warned society about potential future problems and emphasized the necessity of protecting young people from extremist ideologies. The harmful consequences of extremist activities have been documented through evidence and those responsible have been subjected to legal punishment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Kazakhstan has historically been a region in which different religious communities have coexisted peacefully. Islam, particularly the Hanafi school, constitutes the foundation of the country's religious

identity.

However, following independence, the influence of radical movements such as Salafism and Wahhabism increased. These movements have been perceived as threats both to the state structure and to social values. In response to these challenges, the government has sought to combat extremism through educational programs, public awareness campaigns and preventive measures. At the same time, Christian, Jewish, Catholic and Protestant communities continue to maintain their existence peacefully within Kazakh society.



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