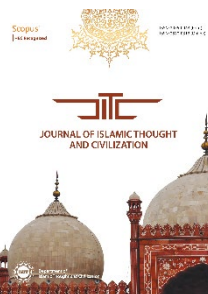
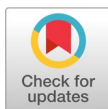


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From Valikhanov to Tokayev: Islam in the Kazakh Nation-Building Agenda

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Abstract

Studies on the Kazakh state and nationhood usually overlook the complex role of Islam in the preservation of cultural identities and as a means of political control. This research aims to analyse the place of Islam in Kazakhstan's national discourse and its connection with nationalism, state-building, and identity formation. The paper examines how early Kazakh intellectuals, Soviet policymakers, and modern leaders have incorporated or excluded Islamic factors in shaping Kazakh identity and governance. The trajectory of Islam in Kazakhstan from the late 19th century up to the post-Soviet period is analyzed, with a focus on three distinct eras: The earliest knowledge of Kazakh intellectualism and Islam, Soviet suppression and accommodation of Islam, and the contemporary state-sponsored resurgence of religious observances. Drawing on archival research, literary analyses, and historical texts, it explores Islam's dual role as a cultural cornerstone and a political instrument. Key figures of the Kazakh national movement are analyzed for their nuanced relationships with Islam and its integration into Kazakh nationalism, emphasizing Islam's securitized yet symbolic position. By situating Islam within the broader discourse of Kazakh nationalism, this study contributes to understanding the interplay between religion, identity, and state-building. It highlights Islam's adaptability as a cultural and political resource in Kazakhstan, offering insights into the dynamics of secular governance and religious identity in a post-Soviet context.

Keywords: historical memory, Kazakh nationalism, Muslim manuscript and printed books, nation-building, secularism, steppe region, Mektebs and madrasas

Highlights

- A complex interplay of nationalism, religious identity, and political agendas of early Kazakh national intellectuals was manipulated or reinterpreted by political ideologies; the perception of intellectuals is still compromised by the imperial/Soviet anti-Islamic agenda.
- The leaders of the early Kazakh national movement recognized Islam's role in Kazakh society while prioritizing secular governance. This duality continued to shape Kazakh identity, even during the Soviet era, despite the official stance of secularism.
- Modern Kazakhstani leaders' oscillation between incorporating Islam into the nation-building agenda and the commitment to secularism has led to several contradictions, like government interference with religious institutions, the restriction of religious freedoms under the pretext of counter-terrorism, and the manipulation of public opinion.

Introduction

Modern Kazakhstan is a secular state that promotes interfaith dialogue and internal harmony among its diverse social groups. The official commitment to building an inclusive democratic society,

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however, is complicated by unofficial policies that priorities a Kazakh-centred nation-building agenda. This raises a question: what role is left for religious institutions and tradition, particularly the Islamic clergy, which represents a significant segment of Kazakh society and has a long history with the nation-building efforts? As a historically Muslim people, Kazakhs underwent profound cultural changes during the colonial and Soviet periods, which shaped their modern national identity. Our research examines the evolving relationship between Kazakh national leaders and Islam, underscoring the enduring significance of this issue within the broader context of nation-building.

Unlike most other Central Asian republics, which generally feature a dominant ethnic group largely contiguous with state borders, Kazakhstan is significantly more diverse, with a historically large Russian/Slavic population making Kazakhs a minority until the mid-1980s.¹ This demographic reality has led Kazakhstan's leadership to pursue a cautious, "hybrid" approach, balancing between "nationalizing" and "civic" state-building. While other states like Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan implemented more rapid and radical nation-building policies, such as earlier shifts from Cyrillic to Latin alphabets and a profound reconsideration of the Russian language's status, Kazakhstan has moved more slowly.² The government promotes a civic "Kazakhstani" identity alongside an emphasis on ethnic Kazakhness, acknowledging the deep impact of Russification and Soviet policies on its population.³ Scholars suggest that the Islamic religious clergy are embedded in a state-building scheme and bear the state-obligated responsibility for providing state-delineated social and political rules. The mosques, for example, in many respects have become a tool for promoting state ideology, proving themselves to be efficient in disseminating state-driven ideas. The observation of the imams in Astana mosques revealed the pattern of building up a state-centric narrative during the sermons on days around national celebrations. For example, closer to Independence Day (December 16), the imam emphasized the blessing of independence for Kazakhs, noting that they could now freely follow their religious beliefs and cultural practices. As for the preparation for Constitution Day (August 30), the chief imam stressed the significance of justice in the sense of the Constitution and the part that Muslims should play in this – obedience to national laws. On pre-Victory Day (May 9) sermons, the stress was also given to the fact that everyone had to defend the motherland.⁴

Modern Kazakhstani leaders have often referred to Islam and have employed these connections as overt symbols of their ties with the Islamic world. All the past and current presidents of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev and Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, have made it a point to stress their link with Islamic customs. Video reports showing Nazarbayev performing Umrah and Hajj advocated for his religious observance. Nazarbayev, in his last memoirs, mentioned his first trip to Mecca and Medina, stating that he was the first Kazakh to enter the Holy Kaaba. He also recounts how he prayed for the welfare of Kazakhstan and Kazakhs while offering his prayers in this holy place, thus associating his spiritual growth with the country's growth.⁵ And it is not merely a symbolic gesture when Nazarbayev, in these recounted memoirs, sends a farewell message to the Kazakh nation. In

¹Alima Bissenova, "Central Asian Encounters in the Middle East: Nationalism, Islam and Postcoloniality in Al-Azhar," *Religion, State and Society* 33, no. 3 (2005): 255, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637490500225052>.

²Dina Sharipova, "Perceptions of National Identity in Kazakhstan: Pride, Language, and Religion," *The Muslim World* 110, no. 4 (2020): 485–502, <https://doi.org/10.1111/muwo.12320>.

³Grigol Ubiria, *Soviet Nation-Building in Central Asia: The Making of the Kazakh and Uzbek Nations* (London: Routledge, 2016), 212.

⁴Alima Bissenova, and Marlene Laruelle, "Building a Muslim Nation," in *Kazakhstan in the Making: Legitimacy, Symbols, and Social Changes*, ed. Marlene Laruelle (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), 212, 224.

⁵Nursultan A. Nazarbayev, *Moia zhizn': Ot Zavisimosti k Svobode* [My Life: From Dependence to Freedom] (Foliant, 2023), 600–603.

his final lines, he says: “May the Almighty strengthen our independence and statehood, granting them unbreakable resilience and vitality! May He preserve our people and our country in peace, harmony, safety, and well-being. I once expressed these exact wishes during my visit to the sacred Kaaba. May they come true! Amen!”⁶

Kazakhstan’s three largest mosques – the Central Mosque of Almaty and the Haziret Sultan and Grand Mosques in Astana – were all constructed during Nazarbayev’s presidency. Nazarbayev’s commitment and influence were crucial to their development, considering the high construction and land costs required to build such enormous non-commercial structures. His involvement was central not only in securing financing but also in mobilizing state bureaucracy to bring these projects to reality. For instance, the Haziret Sultan Mosque, unlike the Nur-Astana Mosque, recognized as a “gift” from Qatar’s emir, was planned and primarily funded by the state from the outset. Any structure built in the downtown Left Bank area requires approval from the Architectural Council under the president, and placing a mosque in the nation’s symbolic heart, close to the “Kazakh Nation” Monument, could only proceed with authorization from the highest levels, including the Architectural Council and Nazarbayev himself.⁷

Following Nazarbayev’s personal and public Islamic religious endeavors, Tokayev also underscored his connection to Islamic tradition during his first visit to Saudi Arabia, where he performed the minor pilgrimage, Umrah, and received the unique honor of entering the sacred Kaaba. This gesture reinforces continuity in the Kazakh leadership’s engagement with Islamic practices, highlighting the symbolic importance of Islam in Kazakhstan’s national and diplomatic identity.⁸ These examples illustrate that despite their political backgrounds as staunch Soviet *apparatchiks*, where atheism was often advantageous for career advancement, both Kazakh leaders have distanced themselves from the atheistic ideology. Instead, they have emphasize the substantial role of Islam in the processes of state-building and national identity. Thus, the core aim of this paper is to explore how various nationalistic figures have either exploited or, conversely, refrained from using Islam as a religious instrument in the construction of Kazakh statehood. This study spans from the second half of the 19th century to the present, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of Islam’s evolving place within Kazakh nationalism and state-building efforts.

There is a rich Soviet historiographical tradition of studying Islam in the Kazakh national culture, which typically dismissed any religious connotations in the publicist legacy of “progressive” (ergo secularist) Kazakh nationalists. Modern scholars create the historical continuity between the debates of early Kazakh nationalists on religion, the Kazakh “folk religion,” and contemporary identity politics in Kazakhstan.⁹ Another trending study is how the “folklorisation” of Islam contributed to its strengthening as a part of national identity, further embedding into national customs, despite the Soviet-era atheist state policies.¹⁰ Studies actively analyze modern state policies

⁶Ibid., 703.

⁷Bissenova and Laruelle, “Building a Muslim Nation,” 212.

⁸Samat Beisembayev, “Kasym-Zhomart Tokaev sovershil malyi hadzh v Mekke [Kasym-Jomart Tokayev Performed Umrah],” *Liter*, July 28, 2022, <https://liter.kz/kasym-zhomart-tokaev-sovershil-umru-1658718786/>.

⁹Galina M. Yemelianova, “Islam, National Identity and Politics in Contemporary Kazakhstan,” *Asian Ethnicity* 15, no. 3 (2014): 287–288, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2013.847643>; Svante E. Cornell, S. Frederick Starr, and Julian Tucker, *Religion and the Secular State in Kazakhstan* (Washington, D.C.: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program, 2018), 32–33.

¹⁰Yemelianova, “Islam, National Identity and Politics,” 289; Adeeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 114–115, 289; Mariya Y. Omelicheva, “Islam in Kazakhstan: A Survey of Contemporary Trends and Sources of Securitization,” *Central Asian Survey* 30, no. 2 (2011): 245,

on Islam, especially the adoption of the discourse of “traditional” or even “Kazakh” Islam, as juxtaposed to “foreign-influenced” Salafism, framing the former as a securitizing and unifying force of the society under full state control.¹¹ Our study contributes to that discussion by offering a nuanced look at the narratives of the Kazakh national leadership.

2. Materials and Methods

This research employs a multidisciplinary approach, integrating historical analysis, textual interpretation, and sociopolitical analysis to examine the evolving role of Islam in the Kazakh national agenda. The methodology is structured around three key phases: archival research, textual analysis, and contextual evaluation.

Primary sources were gathered from historical archives, including official documents, personal letters, and government records from the late 19th century to the post-Soviet era. Soviet-era policies and records on religion were examined to understand the state-religion dynamics over the years. A detailed analysis of literary and scholarly texts helps to challenge Soviet and post-Soviet portrayals of Islam in the Kazakh national agenda. A sociopolitical analysis involved examining government policies, speeches, and public initiatives related to religion. Integrating anthropological insights into religious practices further enriched the study’s understanding of Islam’s cultural and political significance. Finally, the enduring line of the narrative study is the notion of a nation as a modern identity and a product of an intellectual work, as per constructivist concepts of the theory of nationalism.

This combined methodology comprehensively explores Islam’s role in the Kazakh national agenda, ensuring a balanced analysis of historical developments and contemporary realities.

3. Colonial Intellectuals and Islam

To explore this idea broadly and comprehensively, it is essential to identify the central figures from the Kazakh nationalistic cohort whose attachment to Islam was clear or controversial. Hence, Pete Rottier identified two generations of Kazakh intellectuals who, to a lesser or more significant extent, advocated and pursued nationalistic ideas in a form that suits popular theories of nationalism. He understandably includes Muhammad-Hanafiyya “Chokan” Valikhanov (1835-1865), Ibrahim “Ybyrai” Altynsarin (1841-1889), and Ibrahim “Abai” Kunanbayev (1845-1904) in the first cohort of Kazakh intellectuals.¹² These intellectuals viewed Russian culture and Western-oriented education as essential tools for advancing beyond the perceived limitations of the Kazakh nomadic lifestyle and as a gateway to European enlightenment.¹³ However, we argue that in terms of their attachment to

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2011.567069>; Sharipova, “Perceptions of National Identity,” 16; Cornell et al., *Religion and the Secular State in Kazakhstan*, 33.

¹¹Khalid, *Islam after Communism*, 114–115; Yemelianova, “Islam, National Identity and Politics,” 286, 292; Omelicheva, “Islam in Kazakhstan,” 243; Bilal A. Malik, “Islam in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan: Experiencing Public Revival of Islam through Institutionalisation,” *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 13, no. 3 (2019): 367, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2019.1630576>; Narek Mkrtchyan, “The Notion of Kazakhness behind the Symbolic Nation-Building of Kazakhstan,” *CEU Political Science Journal* 9, no. 1–2 (2014): 18. <http://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2458368>.

¹²Pete Rottier, “Creating the Kazak Nation: The Intelligentsia’s Quest for Acceptance in the Russian Empire, 1905–1920” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2005), 52–56, ProQuest (3186099).

¹³Martha B. Olcott, *The Kazakhs*, 2nd edition, Studies of Nationalities, vol. 427 (Hoover Institution Press, 1995), 104–105.

and attitude towards Islam, these figures were often utilised according to the political agenda of the country's regime at that time.

Among the three intellectuals, it seems Chokan Valikhanov's attachment to Islam was the most hostile. Scholars generally agree that Valikhanov expressed concerns about Islam as "hostile to all kinds of knowledge" and a potential "contamination" of Kazakh culture, preferring Russian cultural influence.¹⁴ Proponents of Valikhanov's antagonistic view toward Islam frequently refer to his two prominent works on Islam and Kazakh religiosity. His ethnographic studies, *Sledy shamanstva u kirgizov* [Traces of Shamanism among the Kyrgyz/Kazakh] and *O musul'manstve v stepi* [About Islam in the Steppe] both criticize Islam and question the Kazakhs' adherence to Islamic traditions.¹⁵ However, these anti-Islamic papers were published posthumously, making their credibility highly questionable by modern academic standards. The Soviet publications of Chokan's complete works do not provide the context in which the works were written.

Recent studies show that *O musul'manstve v stepi* was written under the dictation of the ailing Valikhanov in late 1863 or early 1864; it further remains unclear who transcribed Valikhanov's words and to what extent this work genuinely belongs to him.¹⁶ The original drafts of *Sledy shamanstva u kirgizov* were lost too, and the publication relied on Russian Orientalist Nikolay I. Vesselovsky.¹⁷ While the Russian Empire, as an Orthodox Christian empire, would embrace Chokan's critique of Islam, the state that followed, the atheist USSR, sought to use any available means and sources. Without sufficient effort to examine the credibility of the primary sources, Soviet propaganda could forge Valikhanov's image as a staunch atheist advocating against religion, particularly Islam. Post-Soviet nationalistic discourse has made some amendments to this Soviet-imposed image. As a result, voices highlighting other aspects of Valikhanov's views on Islam have grown louder. Hence, Nazira Nurtazina offers a different evaluation of Valikhanov's work. She first refers to him by his full name, Muhammed-Khanafiya (Chokan was the nickname given by his grandmother). She argues that some of Valikhanov's assessments regarding Islam and the religion's dominance in the steppe were silenced and intentionally omitted from Soviet historiography. In a dispute with Russian ethnographer Aleksey I. Levshin, Valikhanov revealed the "genuine self-awareness and true self-identification of the Kazakh people" toward Islam.¹⁸

Regarding the dispute between Valikhanov and Levshin on the religiosity of the Kazakhs, Alima Bissenova partially builds on Nurtazina's work, arguing that Valikhanov presents a counterargument

¹⁴Tomohiko Uyama, "The Geography of Civilizations: A Spatial Analysis of the Kazakh Intelligentsia's Activities, from the Mid-Nineteenth to the Early Twentieth Century," in *Central Asian Societies and the Global World*, ed., Ertac Tunçer, and David Christian (London: Routledge, 2011), 78, 89.

¹⁵Ibid. Note that "Kirgiz" ethnonim was used in reference for both Kazakh and Kyrgyz people by Russian and foreign ethnographers of the late modern era

¹⁶"Shoqan – Trudy: O musul'manstve v stepi [Chokan – Works: About Islam in the Steppe]," Shoqan Yalihanov [website], effective March 14, 2025, https://shoqan.kz/incompleted/works_o_musulmanstve_v_stepi/.

¹⁷"Shoqan – Trudy: Sledy shamanstva u kirgizov [Chokan – Works: Traces of Shamanism among Kazakhs]," Shoqan Yalihanov [website], effective March 14, 2025, https://shoqan.kz/completed/works_shaman/.

¹⁸Nazira Nurtazina, *Islam i Genezis kazahskoi musul'manskoi traditsii* [Islam and the Genesis of Kazakh Muslim Tradition] (Muftiyat, 2024), 58-59. Levshin was a pioneering Western ethnographer depicting Kazakh rural life and geography in his *Opisanie kirgiz-kazach'ih, ili kirgiz-kaisatskih ord i stepei* [Description of the Kazakh Hordes and Steppes] (Tipografiia Karla Kraiia, 1832). He was one of the founders of the imperial narrative that Kazakhs were superficial Muslims; those advocating for the baptism of the Kazakh Steppe later used this narrative.

to Levshin. She suggests that Levshin likely did not observe, understand, or fully grasp the contexts on which he based his hasty conclusions that the Kazakhs, by and large, did not honour Muslim canons and prescriptions¹⁹. Other primary sources that shed light on the ambiguity of Valikhanov's relationship with Islam are his letters to his father. Thus, in the three letters examined, Valikhanov strongly revered Islam, frequently using Islamic terminology and religious language. These letters contain distinct Islamic expressions, such as “*alhamdulillah*,” “*iftiliya insha Allah*” [starting by the will of Allah], “*Huda bilsing*” [God knows], “*Huda razy bolsyng*” [May God be pleased], and “*Huda buiyrsa*” [God willing], which strongly suggest an Islamic influence in his outlook.²⁰ However, regarding Valikhanov's visions of the role of Islam in constructing Kazakh society, we agree with Bruce G. Privratsky, who states that Valikhanov was a forward-thinking young man who viewed Islam as outdated. For that reason, Valikhanov felt uneasy about its spread and hoped that the Kazakhs could bypass Islam entirely, transitioning directly from their traditional steppe culture into modernity.²¹ Yet, he emerges as a tragic figure, as despite his love for his people (the Kazakhs), he seemingly becomes disconnected from them.²²

If the relationship between Valikhanov and Islam can broadly be described as controversial, with a tendency toward hostility from the former toward the latter, Ibrahim Altynsarin's perception of Islam as an element of the Kazakh nationalist agenda was more apparent than Valikhanov's. In addition, unlike Valikhanov, Altynsarin's commitment to Islam was evident in his educational and literary works. Proponents of Altynsarin's strong Islamic beliefs often point to the widely known fact that Soviet authorities, unable to diminish Altynsarin's historical influence, chose to remove any Islamic references from his works. This occurred with his prominent poetic book *Kel, balalar, oqylyq* [Come, Children, Let's Study], where the opening phrase “*Bir Allaga siynyp*” [Relying on the one Allah] was omitted during Soviet times.²³ This revision aligned with the Soviet government's policy to secularize society by stripping religious elements from educational and cultural materials. Consequently, the poem retained its message advocating for education, but any mention of God was excluded to comply with the atheistic ideals actively promoted in the Soviet Union.

Altynsarin's energy and devotion to serving Kazakhs were in the field of education, and his educational project focused on instilling moral values rooted in Islam. In pursuit of his goals, Altynsarin compiled and published an Islamic catechism in the Kazakh language, titled *Musylmanshylyqtyng tutqasy* [Basics of Muslimness] (also known as *Shari'at-ul-Islam*) in 1884. This work was short, and consisted of four parts that explained the profession of faith (shahada), the five obligations (*fardh*) for Muslims and other moral prohibitions and recommendations. It also offered explanations and translations of Arabic prayers in Kazakh for particular situations. Altynsarin's catechism was an important part of his attempt to build up a Kazakh identity that would work well with being a subject of the empire; for instance, many Tsarist administrators were loath to embrace Islam. Altynsarin wanted to restore Kazakh beliefs according to the assumption that Islam is the

¹⁹Alima Zh. Bissenova, “The Field and Life: Reflections of a “Rooted” Anthropologist,” *Sociology of Power* 33, no. 3 (2021): 135, <https://doi.org/10.22394/2074-0492-2021-3-131-148>.

²⁰Chokan Valikhanov, *Sobranie Sochinenii* [Complete Works], vol. 5 (Alma-Ata: Glavnaia redaktsiia Kazahskoi sovetskoi entsiklopedii, 1985), 133–136.

²¹Bruce G. Privratsky, *Turkistan: Kazak Religion and Collective Memory* (PhD diss., University of Tennessee, 1998), 18, https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_graddiss/4067.

²²Isabelle Kreindler, “Ibrahim Altynsarin, Nikolai Il'minskii and the Kazakh National Awakening,” *Central Asian Survey* 2, no. 3 (1983): 102, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634938308400440>.

²³The initial version of these words can be found in Nikolay I. Il'minskii, *Vospominaniia ob I. A. Altynsarine; pis'ma i bumagi I. A. Altynsarina* [Memories on I. A. Altynsarin; letters and papers of I. A. Altynsarin] (Tipo-lit. V. M. Kliuchnikova, 1891), 236.

Kazakh national religion: being Kazakh meant being a good Muslim who performs prayers and rituals concisely. This obedience should not juxtapose with receiving Russian secular knowledge.²⁴ While Altynsarin had no love for the conservative mullahs who, he said, filled people's heads with nonsense and corrupted their native language, he believed that having faith is the best option for every human. One thing that worried Altynsarin a lot was any kind of disrespect to Muslim traditions or the religious feelings of his students. He objected to the establishment of a church choir at one school, which also had Russian students, and objected to serving pork in another.²⁵

Examining the relationship of another key figure in the first generation of Kazakh intelligentsia, Abai, with Islam reveals more controversy than clarity. Abai's image has been heavily shaped differently across the Soviet and post-Soviet times. For example, Soviet-era Mukhtar Auezov's biographical novel *Abai Zholy* portrayed Abai not as a complete atheist but as someone whose attitude toward Islam was more negative and sceptical than favourable. However, after gaining independence and the collapse of the atheistic ideology, Abai's legacy emerged as a central "bridge" between Islam and Kazakh culture and tradition. As one mosque imam put it, Abai's literary heritage is Islam. Today, hardly any sermon in Kazakhstani mosques is delivered without citing Abai's words or referencing him as a pious Muslim. As Bissenova and Laruelle mentioned, imams were also encouraged to incorporate passages from the works of Kazakh writers like Abai and Shakarim, along with Kazakh proverbs, in their teachings. As one imam put it, they must enrich the content, linking religious beliefs with Kazakh cultural heritage to highlight their continuity.²⁶ Similarly, Nurtazina argues that in his magnum opus, *Qara sozder* [Words of Edification], Abai presents himself as a devout, knowledgeable Muslim, possessing faith and reverence for God. Thus, according to her, Abai and the sacred Qur'an are inseparable.²⁷

Returning to *Abai Zholy*, we see that Abai balanced his ambivalence toward Islam, sometimes bordering on rejection, with an acknowledgement of its inevitable influence on Kazakh nomadic society. Thus, in one scene described by Auezov, Abai bitterly feels sorry for his father when the latter tells religious stories and describes his journey to the Hajj. Another scene depicts how Abai openly criticized Islam, providing atheistic arguments and making one of his close relatives extremely angry to the extent that they left his home in a hurry. Thus, in one passage of the book, Abai shares a critical perspective on the Qur'an, quoting a philosopher who questions the depth and clarity of its teachings compared to the insights of other ancient thinkers. Abai reflects on whether the Qur'an, believed to contain the Creator's words, should not be the ultimate source of knowledge, answering humanity's most profound questions on the universe, truth, and the soul. Abai, as per his biographer, pointed out that the Qur'an's explanations are ambiguous, and the plot is sometimes naive or superstitious.²⁸ Yet, the utilization of the image of any historical figure is a possible matter in political or academic spheres. The modern public image of Abai, aligned in the novel with Soviet ideology, finds its other pure religious side in the same Auezov's book. Thus, scholars advocate for Abai's religiosity as deeply rooted and multifaceted: by examining Abai's journey as a Muslim, a study reflects his initial religious education and growth in Islamic literacy. Throughout the novel,

²⁴Ian W. Campbell, *Knowledge and the Ends of Empire: Kazak Intermediaries and Russian Rule on the Steppe, 1731–1917* (Cornell University Press, 2017), 79–80.

²⁵Kreindler, "Ibrahim Altynsarin," 109.

²⁶Bissenova and Laruelle, "Building a Muslim Nation," 224. Explaining the context authors use idiomatic phrase "We have to add some fat to the meat from the ribs".

²⁷Nurtazina, *Islam i genezis*, 4.

²⁸In reference to surah Al-Fil (Q.105), which is described as fictitious and unrealistic and surah Al-Falaq (Q.113) in which seeking from God the defence from witchcraft is not much different to shamanistic beliefs, as Abai claims. Mukhtar Auezov, *Abai zholy: roman-epopeia* [Path of Abai: an Epic Novel] (Almaty: Zhazushy, 2009), 31.

Abai interacts with religious figures, including mullahs and imams, and develops a nuanced understanding of faith, balancing reverence for Islamic teachings with a critical perspective on superstitions and dogmatic practices. Scholars argue that M. Auezov portrays Abai as a thinker who values genuine spirituality and criticizes hypocrisy among religious leaders. Abai's actions, like reciting the Qur'ān for his deceased grandmother, display his devotion and a profound, contemplative approach to faith, emphasizing gratitude and compassion.²⁹ These elements collectively illustrate Abai's commitment to Islam as a source of personal strength and cultural identity. Furthermore, one could argue that *Abai Zholıy* is simply a literary novel without academic relevance, and therefore, its credibility should not be considered in scholarly discussions. However, despite its non-academic nature and lack of a reliable portrayal of Abai's views on Islam – or any connection between his national ideas and Islam – the novel plays a significant role in Kazakhstan's nation-building process today. This influence occurs through the educational system, where *Abai Zholıy*, a required reading for high school students, shapes a general and often one-sided view of Abai's relationship with Islam.

4. Early Kazakh Nationalism and Islam

The three figures of the first generation of Kazakh intellectuals were not the first Kazakh nationalists who promoted political nationalistic ideas. However, through their work in ethnography, history, education, and literature, early Kazakh intellectuals planted the seeds of Kazakh nationalism. These seeds needed only time and conditions to grow into a national movement. The revolutionary unrest that began to shake the Russian Empire catalyzed this growth. Thus, starting in 1905, a new generation of Kazakh intellectuals, educated in Russian institutions, began to see the value in expressing their identity in national terms. Inspired by the Kazakh language used in Altynsarın's and Kunanbayev's writings and Valikhanov's ethnographic studies, they started to advocate for a distinct Kazakh role within the empire. Just as the ideas of the Siberian autonomists and other Russian thinkers had shaped the first generation of Kazakh reformers, the liberal ideas of the Russian intelligentsia continued to inspire this new wave of Kazakh modernists.³⁰ The second generation's discussion on Islam occurred in the first Kazakh press, namely the newspaper *Qazaq* (1913-1918) and the journal *Aiqap* (1911-1915). Edited by Muhammadjan Seralin (1871–1929), *Aiqap* featured articles by Kazakh, Tatar, and Russian writers, aiming to present diverse viewpoints on various topics. *Qazaq*, edited by Akhmet Baitursynuly (1873–1937), Mir Yakub Dulatuly (1885–1937), and Alikhan Bukeikhanov (1866-1937), soon became an official newspaper of the Kazakh nationalist self-proclaimed “Alash Orda” autonomy.³¹ Bukeikhanov argued that Kazakh mullahs lacked knowledge of *Sharī'ah*, making a court system based on *adat* the most suitable for the nomads.³² In

²⁹G. Kenzhebekova, B. O. Smanov, and O. Soylemez, “Religiozniy obraz Abaia v romane-epopee M. Auezova ‘Put' Abaia’ [The religious image of Abai in M. Auezov's “Path of Abai” epic novel],” *Keruen* 75, no. 2 (2022): 145. <https://doi.org/10.53871/2078-8134.2022.2-11>.

³⁰Rottier, “*Creating the Kazak Nation*,” 108.

³¹Olcott, *The Kazakhs*, 115.

³²Qyr balasy (ps.), “Taghy da bi ham bilik haqynda [Again on biys and governance],” in “*Qazaq*” *gazeti* [Newspaper ‘Qazaq’], vol. 2, ed. Gharifolla Anes, Tolqyn Zamzayeva, and Abai Myrzaghalı (Almaty: Alashorda qoghamdyq qory, 2023), 69–71. On *Aiqap* vs *Qazaq* debates on religion, see Tomohiko Uyama, “The Changing Religious Orientation of Qazaq Intellectuals in the Tsarist Period: Sharī'a, Secularism, and Ethics,” in *Islam, Society and States across the Qazaq Steppe (18th – Early 20th Centuries)*, ed. Niccolo Pianciola and Paolo Sartori (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2013): 95–118; Gulnar Kendirbaeva, “We are children of Alash...’ The Kazakh Intelligentsia at the Beginning of the 20th Century in Search of National Identity and Prospects of the Cultural Survival of the Kazakh People,” *Central Asian Survey* 18, no. 1 (1999): 5–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634939995722>.

contrast, Bakhytzhann Qarataev from *Aiqap* had no doubts that the Kazakh nation was truly Muslim and believed it was unethical to question the Muslimness of the Kazakhs.³³

Despite the secularist takes, Bukeikhanov was by no means an anti-Islamic figure. He actively collaborated with the Muslim faction of the Russian State Duma (Parliament) and, in 1914, wrote an open letter to its members criticizing the Holy Synod for infringing on the religious rights of Kazakhs. However, he prioritized freedom of conscience over Sharia, which marked a significant difference between his views and those of some other Muslim leaders. Another Alash Orda leader, Dulatuly, was a staunch proponent of the revival and promotion of Islam among the Kazakhs. Tomohiko Uyama argues that Dulatuly's book *Oian, Qazaq!* [Awake, Kazakh!] called to introduce *Shari'ah* law and open a madrasa in each district.³⁴ Dulatuly argued religious issues of his time, urging that the Kazakh nation, under the influence of colonialism, has drifted away from its national values and Islamic beliefs. Hence, Islamic connotations are present throughout the poem. Thus, Dulatuly explicitly references key Islamic terms such as the Qur'ān, Allah, and *Jannah*, intertwining these with broader themes of moral decay, unity, and identity. The poet laments the loss of faith and weakened affiliation to the Islamic spiritual rituals, as illustrated in the line "*Dau dese umtylatyn sorly qazaq, din dese shalqaqtap qaldy qazaq*" [The miserable Kazakh rushes into quarrels but turns away when it comes to religion].³⁵ Furthermore, the absence of Islamic educational institutions reflects the Kazakhs' spiritual decline. Thus, the line "*Qazaqtyng kop zherinde meshit zhoq, zhoqqa bolghan sebep missioner pop*" [Kazakhs lack mosques, and the reason for that is a [Christian] missionary clerical] criticizes the community's indifference to establishing Islamic religious institutions.³⁶ Yet, the poet criticizes how Kazakhs fail to embody Islamic principles like honor and dignity. Thus, we argue that the poem intertwines Islamic spirituality with a call for national unity and cultural preservation. The call for awakening and collective action might reflect Islamic teachings of unity (*ummah*) and collective responsibility.

By this time, Dulatuly's Islamic religious conviction waned as he strengthened his ideological ties with Bukeikhanov. Furthermore, when *Aiqap* ceased publication, the pro-Islamic voices quieted as well.³⁷ At the same time, it would be a colossal mistake to assert that the Alash leaders, publishing their visions in the *Qazaq* about the future of the Kazakhs and their nation-building efforts, were anti-Islamic. Indeed, the Platform of the Alash Party declared the separation of religion and government, emphasizing the secular nature of the future autonomous Kazakh entity. Simultaneously, they proposed the establishment of a separate mufti. Moreover, they suggested allocating the rights for recording marriages, births, deaths, and divorces to Islamic religious clergy.³⁸ Thus, as we can see from their program, the Alash leaders, despite their attempts to create a secular Kazakh nationalistic entity within the Russian Empire, recognized and acknowledged the influence and place of Islam in

³³"Kenges zhiylsynda Qarataevtyng soilegen doklady [Karatayev's report on Council meeting]," in Rymgali Nurgaliyev, ed., *Aiqap* (Almaty: "Qazaq entsiklopediiasy" bas redaktisiyas, 1995), 211–213.

³⁴Tomohiko Uyama, "Byla li islamskaia al'ternativa? Mesto islama v natsional'nom dvizhenii kazahov nachala XX veka [Was There an Islamic Alternative? The Place of Islam in the Kazakh National Movement of the Early 20th Century]," *Shygys*, no. 2 (2008), 145. <https://shorturl.at/bD9Oy>.

³⁵Mirzhaqyp Dulatov, *Oian, Qazaq! Roman, oleng-zhyrlar, anggimeler* [Awake, Kazakh! Novel, poems, tales], ed. Nauryzbai Aqbai (Almaty: Atamura, 2003), 60.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Uyama, "Byla li islamskaia al'ternativa?," 146.

³⁸Alikhan Bokeikhanov et al., "Alash" partiiasyning programasyning zhobasy [Project of Alash Party's program], in Anes, Zamzayeva, and Myrzaghalii, eds., "*Qazaq*" gazeti, vol. 5, 458–459.

nomadic society and sought to utilize Islam for their nationalistic agenda. The Alash leaders' proposition to grant Islamic clergy authority over family affairs, a core institution in any society, consolidated their priorities. Currently, the ideas of those Alash intellectuals continue in Kazakhstan's political environment, reflected in the dedication to secularism in all modern political parties' programs.

The October Revolution of 1917 and the subsequent seizure of power by the Bolsheviks drastically altered the place of Islam in the nationalistic agenda of Kazakh intellectuals. Even though during the creation of national republics in Central Asia in the 1920s, Islam continued to be considered a significant social element and was not as brutally repressed as the Orthodox Church – which the Reds viewed as an ally of their foe, the Whites – there was no place for Islam in the construction of national republics. At the same time, the Bolsheviks' religious policies across Central Asia varied, alternating between violence and negotiation. What was certain, however, was that religion, in the Bolsheviks' view, had to be eradicated as a feature of capitalism and a tool of exploitation by oppressors over the oppressed.³⁹ The Alash leaders, who initially resisted the new regime, eventually integrated into the Bolsheviks' national construction projects, though primarily in the educational and social spheres rather than the political one. In one respect, the Alash leaders and the Bolsheviks shared a similar perspective: the secular nature of the proposed Kazakh state. Notably, the Bolsheviks' first decree on religion, “On the Separation of Church and State,” signed by Lenin on January 23, 1918, reflected the earlier proposal by the Alash Party. Therefore, since Islam was excluded from the Soviet national project, it can be argued that significant manifestations of Islamic and nationalistic relations did not emerge until the late Soviet period. However, this assertion is relevant to the appeal of Islam as a political phenomenon. Kazakh nationalism, as a sense of Kazakhness and being Muslim, maintained its connection during the Soviet period. Allen J. Frank studied one manifestation of Islamic connotations and Kazakhness in the letters written by Kazakh soldiers in the Red Army. He argues that in 1941 and 1942, the Red Army experimented with creating military units predominantly made up of Kazakhs, though these initiatives were eventually discontinued. However, the notable successes of these units, such as the Panfilov Division, were celebrated in the Kazakh press. This recognition gave Kazakhs a sense that their specific contributions to the Soviet war effort were being acknowledged. Under these conditions, it is understandable that themes of Kazakh patriotism and local pride emerged strongly in Kazakh letter-poems. These poems often display a pronounced sense of “Kazakhness,” expressed not only through ethnic identity and connections with other Kazakhs but also through spiritual elements. These include mentions of ancestral spirits, revered local Sufi saints, their shrines, and other aspects of Sufi religious traditions.⁴⁰ He also suggests that for Kazakhs fighting against the Nazis, Russian patriotism held little significance, if any, during the war.⁴¹

5. Leaders of Independent Kazakhstan and Islam

As mentioned before, the connection between Kazakhness and Islam was primarily in terms of ethnic identity, with Kazakhs striving to preserve their ethnic code through Islam. However, the exploitation of religion, per se, began in the late Soviet period, when Gorbachev launched groundbreaking reforms known as *Glasnost* and *Perestroika*. During this time, religions began to occupy central roles in the initial expressions of nationalism within the Soviet Republics.

³⁹Shoshanna Keller, *To Moscow, Not Mecca: The Soviet Campaign Against Islam in Central Asia, 1917-1941* (Praeger, 2001), 45.

⁴⁰Allen J. Frank, *Kazakh Muslims in the Red Army, 1939–1945*, Brill's Inner Asian Library, vol. 42 (Brill, 2022), 122.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 169.

Regarding Kazakhstan, the return of religion to public life became a significant cultural issue for Nursultan Nazarbayev during the late Soviet period. As Moscow began supporting Russian Orthodoxy to address societal problems, the same freedoms and recognition had to be extended to other religions, including Islam. However, Moscow was reluctant to embrace Islam, viewing it as a retrograde force hindering societal and economic progress, unlike Russian Orthodoxy, which was seen as promoting spiritual fulfilment and social cohesion. Despite this, by the time Nazarbayev assumed leadership as First Secretary of Kazakhstan, Moscow acknowledged Islam's role in the national revivals of Central Asian republics.

To moderate the Islamic revival in Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev removed the republic from the jurisdiction of the Central Asian Spiritual Directorate of Muslims (SADUM), a Stalin-era institution based in Tashkent. This move reflected Nazarbayev's desire to assert greater control over the growing Islamic influence in Kazakhstan, particularly in the southern regions, where unsanctioned mosques were proliferating and ties to Uzbekistan were strong. While legally questionable, Nazarbayev's decision to withdraw from SADUM was accepted by Moscow due to the broader context of increasing republican autonomy under Gorbachev's reforms. Nazarbayev's strategy included appointing Kazi Ratbek Nysanbai, a senior SADUM official in Kazakhstan, as the country's first independent mufti. This appointment, formalized in January 1990 during the first Kurultai of the Muslims of Kazakhstan, allowed Nazarbayev to legalize the rapid growth of Islamic activities. Between 1989 and 1991, the number of legal mosques in Kazakhstan increased dramatically, from 63 to 230, marking a significant rise in religious infrastructure.

Nazarbayev sponsored the creation of the Alma-Ata Islamic Institute to support further Islamic education and leadership, which aimed to train mullahs locally rather than relying on Uzbekistan. The institute quickly garnered immense interest, receiving 200 applications for just 20 places. Additionally, Kazakhstan began publishing its first officially sanctioned Islamic newspaper, *Islam Shapaghaty*, reflecting the growing prominence of Islam in public and cultural life. As a result, Nazarbayev's way preserved the state sovereignty, revived Islam, and identified a reasonable religious and national identity equilibrium during the period of the profound political and social transformations in the Soviet Union.⁴²

The post-Soviet shifts revealed new challenges, and one of them was the Islamic factor as the key component of the nation-building process. Nevertheless, the integration of Islam into the state construction was achieved within the general context of secularization, which was the vision of the Alash leaders. The state and the governing regime of Kazakhstan have benefited from the securitization of Islam. Although the constitution of the country mandates the distinction between state and religion, and bans the government from meddling in religious activities, the state has also positioned itself as an example of spiritual and religious moderation, dialogue and understanding. He initiated many measures towards religious and ethnic understanding, including the establishment of the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan in 1995 to ensure that the country's ethnic groups were represented at the national level. Nazarbayev also established regular meetings with representatives of all religions called the Congress of World and Traditional National Religions, hosted in Kazakhstan. Nazarbayev emphasized further the country's role as a hub for interfaith dialogue, launching the "Palace of Nations" concept, which is an idea of a global centre for religious and interethnic understanding. This vision was followed by the construction of the Palace of Peace and Harmony, which has a mosque, an Orthodox church, a synagogue and a Buddhist temple in one building. Furthermore, for the purpose of spirituality and the dialogue of modern cultures, Kazakhstan also introduced the World Forum of Spiritual Culture. However, the reality of the implementation of religious policy is different from the declared goal of ensuring religious freedom. The Kazakh government closely supervises religious life and exerts substantial control over the

⁴²Olcott, *The Kazakhs*, 135.

DUMK (Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan) and other religious institutions. Over time, the authorities have restricted religious pluralism through stricter legislation. For example, in 2005, the government passed amendments to religious laws to combat terrorism and extremism. These amendments required the registration of missionary activities, rendering unregistered religious activities, including worship, illegal and subject to administrative penalties. The law facilitated the arrest of Islamic missionaries and the deportation of foreign Muslims accused of engaging in unauthorized missionary work. While framed as a counter-terrorism measure, this tightening of religious laws has been criticized for narrowing the space for religious freedoms in Kazakhstan, reflecting a gap between the state's rhetoric of tolerance and its regulatory practices.⁴³

President Tokayev has maintained consistency with Nazarbayev's religious policies by attending Islamic religious holidays, hosting Ifar during Ramadan, and publicly acknowledging his religious affiliation.⁴⁴ Among these aspects, the most notable reflection of the state's attitude toward Islam can be observed in the educational sphere. To uphold and preserve the secular nature of the state, the delineation between state and religion must begin within academic institutions. Nowadays, the Introduction to Religious Studies course is taught in the 9th grade of secondary school, and the textbook's content reveals that it mainly focuses on Islam, thereby undermining efforts to promote secularity in education. The cornerstone of all Soviet atheistic efforts was the unequivocal rejection of Islam's central pillar: the belief that Muhammad was a prophet, specifically God's messenger to humanity. In all Soviet books and journals devoted to Islam, Soviet authors referred to Muhammad solely by his name, deliberately omitting the "Prophet" title. However, the modern textbook explicitly places "Prophet" before Muhammad's name.⁴⁵ Considering that all textbooks used in Kazakhstani schools undergo rigorous scientific review and approval processes, this inclusion reflects the state's attitude toward Islam, signaling respect and acknowledgement for Islamic beliefs within the educational and national building system.

6. Conclusion

Islam's place in the Kazakh national agenda has been dynamic, shifting across historical periods to reflect the evolving needs and ideologies of the state and its leaders. It has been employed as a reference and a way of harnessing popular support, depending on general political, social, and cultural changes. Our paper shows that the narratives of Islam and the nation in the works of prominent Kazakh intellectuals should be deconstructed, showing the contexts in which, our current perception of these works evolved. These contexts often refer to the political and cultural agenda of different regimes, be that the Islamophobic Russian Empire, the atheist Soviet Union, or implicitly secularist modern Kazakhstan.

The early Kazakh intellectuals Chokan Valikhanov, Ibrahim Altynsarin, and Abai Kunanbayev are good examples of the multifaceted role of Islam in shaping Kazakh identity and nationalism. Valikhanov, however, was quite sceptical about Islam and its ability to be compatible with modernization. Nevertheless, his works were re-evaluated, and certain post-Soviet scholars have noted that he used a rather subtle strategy in interacting with Islamic traditions. In contrast, Altynsarin

⁴³Mariya Y. Omelicheva, "Islam in Kazakhstan: A Survey of Contemporary Trends and Sources of Securitization," *Central Asian Survey* 30, no. 2 (2011): 251, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2011.567069>.

⁴⁴"Tokaev rasskazal o svoei religii [Tokayev Spoke about His Religion]," *Kursiv Media*, July 23, 2019, <https://kz.kursiv.media/2019-07-23/tokaev-rasskazal-o-svoey-religii/>.

⁴⁵D. T. Kenzhetayev, A. A. Sailybayev, and G. N. Novikova, *Svetskost' i osnovy religiovedeniia. Uchebnik dlia uchashchihsia 9 klassa urovnia osnovnogo srednego obrazovaniia* [Secularism and Fundamentals of Religious Studies: A Textbook for 9th Grade Secondary School Students] (Arman-PV, 2023), 345.

incorporated Islamic principles into his educational and cultural initiatives, and he promoted moral values through religion while at the same time calling for a modern, educated Kazakh society. How Islam is shown as being interconnected with Kazakh nationalism in Soviet and post-Soviet narratives is a good example of how the use of Islam has been rather fluid. Religious leaders often cited his works to connect Islamic teachings with Kazakh cultural heritage. The leaders of Alash Orda further continued this engagement with Islam while attempting to build a secular national framework suitable for nomadic Kazakh society. The issues of Islam and Kazakh identity were covered by the news media of that time, such as *Qazaq* and *Aiqap*. Mir Yakub Dulatuly promoted the revival of Islamic traditions. Nevertheless, there was Alikhan Bukeikhanov, who, although favoured secular governance, realised the social and cultural importance of Islam. In this respect, the Alash Party's platform of 1917 is a good example of this duality: the Islamic clergy was to have authority in family matters in a secular state, so the role of Islam in Kazakh society is clear. The Bolsheviks sought to suppress religion — including Islam — as part of their broader anti-religious agenda during the Soviet period. Although Islam was excluded from the national project, it remained an element of Kazakh identity, especially in cultural expressions. For example, during World War II, Kazakh soldiers referred to Islamic and Sufi traditions in their poetry and letters and combined ethnic pride with spiritual elements. This period shows how Islam shaped the identity of Kazakh people during the Soviet period, when atheism was the official policy. In the late Soviet era, the political and social reforms brought about the resurgence of religion as an essential part of national revival. In Soviet Kazakhstan under Nursultan Nazarbayev, Islam was used to promote national unity and cultural identity while the state remained in control. The establishment of an independent Spiritual Administration in 1990, the rapid construction of mosques, and the establishment of Islamic educational institutions indicated a deliberate effort to incorporate Islam into nation-building without jeopardizing secular governance. This approach enabled the state to preserve the cultural role of Islam while at the same time fulfilling its main political objectives. In independent Kazakhstan, Islam was gradually incorporated into the nation-building processes while being subjected to strict state regulation. In Kazakhstan, religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue have been promoted by the Kazakhstani government through national forums such as the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan and the Congress of World and Traditional National Religions. Additionally, Kazakhstan shows its openness to people of diverse religious backgrounds by constructing high-profile infrastructure projects like the Palace of Peace and Harmony. Nevertheless, these public demonstrations of inclusiveness were accompanied by tighter controls on religious practices, a posture that pointed to the securitization of Islam. Adaptation of Islam in modern Kazakh society is also observed at the level of leadership, which is rather symbolic and calculated. The former and the current presidents of the country, Nazarbayev and Tokayev, respectively, are seen engaging in Islamic rituals, thus incorporating Islam into the national leadership.

Islam has been an integral, yet it remains a hotly debated aspect of the Kazakh state and nation. It has been employed by early thinkers to form the modern Kazakh state, suppressed during the Soviet period, and allowed to resurrect itself following the attainment of sovereignty. The role of Islam has been complex as it reflects wider nation-building processes. It is a cultural and historical marker as well as a political means to support authority, which shows its importance in the Kazakh national plan. This complex relationship shows how Islam can be made to fit the Kazakh situation – a topic that needs more scientific analysis.

6.1. Limitations and Implications

The present study is based on a rather limited number of subjects who are the prominent representatives of the Kazakh intellectual elite, making the research prone to generalisations, and overlooking the dynamics of the nationalist narrative. This sampling approach is justified by the scant research in the field, making the paper a starting point for further discussion.

Author Contribution

Yerik Tungatarov: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, funding acquisition, investigation, methodology, writing – original draft. **Rustem Zholdybalin:** project administration, validation, supervision, writing – review & editing.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no financial or non-financial conflict of interest regarding the subject matter or material discussed in this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The corresponding author, upon request, will provide the data associated with this study.

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