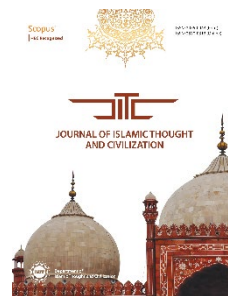
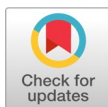


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Traditional Islamic View on Religion and State Relations: The Case of Kazakhstan

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Abstract

The current study aimed to examine the primary functional activities of Kazakhstan following its independence, focusing on state-confessional relations with the Islamic religion. Moreover, it explored the nature of state-confessional relations, state policy on religion, and the principal measures implemented by the government to combat and prevent the spread of radical and destructive ideologies within the country. To this end, both secondary sources and empirical research data were utilized. As a secular state, Kazakhstan's relationship with religion, including Islam, was analyzed through the lens of fundamental theoretical frameworks proposed by various scholars. The study also investigated specific measures taken by the state to rehabilitate citizens who left the country under the influence of radical ideology to engage in armed conflicts abroad and have since returned. A deductive approach was employed to consider the theoretical foundations of traditional Islamic discourse and its practical application within Kazakhstan. This research provided a case study of the mechanisms and functional interactions between the state and Islam within the context of state-confessional relations. In this regard, the importance and outcomes of religious and religious studies expertise of traditional Islamic texts and literature in the prevention and reinforcement of anti-radical narratives were analyzed. Using research findings and statistical data, the study presented an analysis of the activities of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan. Moreover, it also identified the key mechanisms that have proven effective in maintaining religious stability.

Keywords: Kazakhstan, prevention of radicalism, religious administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan, religious studies expertise, state policy, traditional Islam

Introduction

The global context can significantly influence local situations in any region. Consequently, the international community is increasingly concerned with maintaining interfaith and intercultural harmony as a means of ensuring sustainable development. Firstly, strengthening interfaith harmony helps to prevent contemporary challenges and conflicts. Secondly, the traditional notion of interregional borders is gradually losing relevance, compelling all states to address issues related to refugees and displaced persons. This raises the question of whether humanity is truly prepared to

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demonstrate genuine harmony and mutual understanding. Thirdly, fostering interfaith dialogue and mutual understanding within society offers a powerful means of countering extremism, terrorism, xenophobia, religious illiteracy, and authoritarian ideologies that have contributed to global instability.

In this context, the current study examined the spread of radicalism in Kazakhstan, particularly through Salafi and Wahhabi movements that oppose the traditional Islamic faith. Moreover, the study also analyzed the comprehensive measures taken by both the state and the official Islamic religious institutions in response.

The Republic of Kazakhstan is a secular, democratic state characterized by religious and ethnic diversity. This factor plays a significant and ongoing role in shaping the nation's political, social, and cultural orientation. Using Kazakhstan as a case study, this research considered the theoretical foundations of historical secularism to explore both the advantages and key challenges in the relationship between the state and religion. However, the primary objective of this study was to focus on the principal strategies and measures implemented by the state and traditional religious institutions, including traditional Islam, in response to the growing threat of radical ideologies, which began to proliferate in the country following years of religious suppression. A clear academic and critical distinction must be made when analyzing traditional Islamic thought. However, before addressing this issue, it is essential to first understand the foundations of state-confessional relations in Kazakhstan as a secular state, including the main mechanisms of interaction and the functional separation between secular and religious spheres.

In Kazakhstan, the religious landscape is evaluated not only through internal assessments but also by external institutions. For this reason, the current study incorporated both domestic analyses and international perspectives to provide a more objective understanding of the religious situation. The study primarily focused on foundational academic debates surrounding the theory of secularism, core concepts of state-religion relations, and the dynamics of religious modernism. These discussions serve to comprehensively analyze state-confessional relations in Kazakhstan, as well as the role of traditional Islamic discourse in the prevention of religious radicalism and extremism.

The works of Maclure, Stolz and Tanner, Kalkan, and Stark and Finke aim to reassess the prerequisites and consequences of religion in modern societies.¹ Rather than affirming the foundational assumptions of secularization theory, these studies critique its validity, examine its treatment in the literature, and explore its implementation in global politics. Since the 1980s, secularization theory has faced criticism, particularly from proponents of market theory, such as Stark and Finke.²

Within Western academia, historical inquiry into theories of secularism is vast. However, in the specific context of analyzing traditional Islam within a secular state, such as Kazakhstan, the theoretical contributions of scholars, for instance Talal Asad and Wael Hallaq become especially relevant. Hallaq highlighted the need to critically examine the role of the modern state in citizens'

¹Jocelyn Maclure, "Towards a Political Theory of Secularism," in *The Sources of Secularism*, ed. Anna Tomaszewska and Hasse Hämmäläinen (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Jörg Stolz and Pascal Tanner, "Secularization, Secularity, and Secularism in the New Millennium: Macro-theories and Research," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, June 25, 2019, <https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-792>; Buğra Kalkan, "Theory of Religious Markets and Secularism: An Analysis on Muslim-Majority Countries," *International Journal of Human Sciences* 20, no. 2 (2023): 156–166; Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (University of California Press, 2000).

²Stolz and Tanner, "Secularization, Secularity."

lives. Furthermore, he explored the interaction between state structures and Sharia, positioning them as competing systems of governance.³ In his recent essay, Khan noted that Asad engages with broad, cross-disciplinary categories in his interpretation of secularism.⁴ These scholarly perspectives are instrumental in understanding the transformation of secular principles and their application within religious societies, such as Kazakhstan.

A key issue in the post-Soviet context has been the revival of traditional Islam, which for centuries safeguarded religious identity and daily cultural practices. The studies of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Muhammad Latif Fauzi, Omelicheva, Bedford and Mahmudlu, and Vural provide a theoretical foundation to examine the restoration of national and religious identity through traditional Islam in secular post-Soviet states.⁵

At national level, the historical roots of traditional Islam in Kazakhstan are examined as an essential component of national identity. In this regard, the contributions of local scholars, such as Muminov, Kenzhetai, Sultangalieva, Baitenova, and Zhorabek are of particular significance.⁶ Their studies, interviews, and commentaries highlight how state-religion cooperation has shaped Kazakhstan's post-independence religious policy. Meanwhile, the analyses of scholars, such as Zhusipbek and Nagayeva call for a critical examination of the concept of "traditional Islam" and the prevailing forms of "traditionalism."⁷

As the literature review demonstrates, state-confessional relations and the role of traditional Islam have been examined by both international and domestic scholars. However, the integration of Islam into a secular framework, specifically in the context of Kazakhstan, remains underexplored. There is still a pressing need for an in-depth study of the state's strategies, the capacity of traditional

³Mark D. Welton, "The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament, by Wael B. Hallaq," *The Middle East Journal* 67, no. 3 (2013): 492.

⁴Sohaib Khan, "Thinking about Secularism with Asad, Twenty Years after Formations," *Religion and Society* 15, no. 1 (2024): 127, <https://doi.org/10.3167/arrs.2024.150110>.

⁵Senad Mrahorovic, "Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Islam in the Modern World: Changed by the West, Threatened by Fundamentalism, Keeping Faith with Tradition, by Hossein Nasr," *ICR Journal* 3, no. 2 (2012): 409–410, <https://doi.org/10.52282/icr.v3i2.571>; Muhammad Latif Fauzi, "The Roles of Kyai and Pesantren in Preserving Islamic Tradition and Negotiating Modernity," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 6 no. 1 (2012): 125–144, <http://dx.doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2012.6.1.125-144>; Mariya Omelicheva, "Islam and Power Legitimation: Instrumentalization of Religion in Central Asian States," *Contemporary Politics* 22, no. 2 (2016): 144–163, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2016.1153287>; Sofie Bedford, Ceyhun Mahmudlu, and Shamkhal Abilov, "Protecting Nation, State and Government: 'Traditional Islam' in Azerbaijan," *Europe-Asia Studies* 73 no. 4 (2021): 691–712, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2021.1899136>; Mehmet Vural, "Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Traditionalism," *IJUM Journal of Religion and Civilisational Studies* 7, no. 1 (2024): 127, <https://journals.iium.edu.my/irkh/index.php/ijrcs/article/view/314>.

⁶Ashirbek Muminov, *Hanafitskiy Mazhab v Istorii Tsenralnoy Azii [The Hanafi Mazhab in the History of Central Asia]* (Kazakh Encyclopedia, 2015); Aigul Esenalieva, "Dosai Kenzhetai: We Need to Develop a Scientific Approach to the Spiritual Heritage of Our Ancestors," *Kazislam.Kz*, April 23, 2019, <https://kazislam.kz/ru/2019/04/dosaj-kenzhetaj-nuzhno-razvivat-nauchn/>; Alma Sultangalieva, *Islam v Kazahstane: Istoriya, Etnichnost' i Obshchestvo [Islam in Kazakhstan: History, Ethnicity, and Society]* (Almaty, Kazakhstan, 1998), 76; Nagima Baitenova, and Zhuldyz Zhorabek, "Islamism, the Main Stages of Development: Religious Discourse," *Eurasian Journal of Religious Studies* 33 no. 1 (2023): 3–11, <https://doi.org/10.26577/EJRS.2023.v33.i1.r1>.

⁷Galym Zhusipbek, and Zhanar Nagayeva, "On 'Traditional Islam' and Traditionalism in Central Asian Countries," *CAA Network*, January 18, 2018, accessed July 1, 2025, <https://www.caa-network.org/archives/11278>.

Islamic institutions, and their joint responses to radicalism. The current study addressed these gaps by examining the range of related issues through a comprehensive and context-specific lens.

2. Methodology

A qualitative case study was employed as the research design. The objective was to examine the relationship between the state and religion in the context of Kazakhstan, to explore the integration of traditional Islam with national identity, and to consider this integration as a strategy against radical ideologies. The historical timeframe covered in the study spanned from Kazakhstan's declaration of independence in 1991 to the present day (1991–2025).

Peer-reviewed scientific articles, critical reviews of foundational theoretical works, and a combination of theoretical and empirical research methodologies—along with relevant statistical data - enabled a comprehensive qualitative analysis and synthesis of the issue. The findings indicated that similar patterns exist across the post-Soviet space regarding this topic. In particular, the works of Ohlsson, Omelicheva, and Malik provided valuable insights and analogies, aiding the comparative analysis of core issues and challenges faced by post-Soviet states in their efforts to counter radical movements.⁸

The empirical basis of the study included official legal documents and regulatory frameworks accessed through the government portal of the Republic of Kazakhstan (www.gov.kz). Moreover, it also included state programs, strategic documents, and materials from the Committee for Religious Affairs under the Ministry of Culture and Information. Additional resources included publications and official communications from the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan (SAMK) (www.muftiyat.kz) along with reports and analyses from national media outlets.

Content analysis was conducted using keywords, such as secularism, traditional Islam, Salafism, radical ideologies, national identity, traditions, and religious studies expertise. A historical and sociological explanation for the emergence and spread of radical and Salafi ideologies in Kazakhstani society was derived through a screening analysis of the collected information. Given the complexity of the issue, the study adopted an interdisciplinary approach incorporating insights from international religious studies and political science.

Open-access interviews with both foreign and domestic scholars and experts in religious studies were analyzed to gain expert assessments and forward-looking perspectives on the subject. The availability of interviews and scholarly articles in the public domain allowed for the rapid overcoming of geographic and institutional barriers, facilitating the identification of key arguments and enabling a robust critical discourse analysis.

Based on the collected materials, a practical model outlining the anti-radicalization efforts of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan, as a representative body of both the state and the Islamic faith, was developed. The study also identified the most effective mechanisms used to counteract radical influences in the country.

3. Government and Religion: The Concept of Common Interests and Functional Division

Following independence, Kazakhstan, a multi-confessional and multi-ethnic country, established itself as a secular state. A defining feature of its state-confessional relations is the

⁸Henrik Ohlsson, "Islam and Secular State in Uzbekistan: State Control of Religion and its Implications for the Understanding of Secularity," *Central Asian Survey* 38, no. 3 (2019): 485–493, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2019.1601053>; Omelicheva, "Islam and Power," 144–163; Bilal Ahmad Malik, "Islam in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan: Experiencing Public Revival of Islam Through Institutionalisation," *ICR Journal* 10, no. 1 (2019): 70–74, <https://doi.org/10.52282/icr.v10i1.72>.

principle that no religion is recognized as state-sponsored. However, in recognition of the country's centuries-old historical and cultural heritage, the state acknowledged the historical significance of Sunni Islam (specifically the Hanafi madhhab) and Orthodox Christianity in the preamble to the Law on Religious Activities and Religious Associations, adopted on 11th October 2011.

To justify the principles of secularism, reference is often made to secularization theory. However, as confirmed by several scholars, this theory, originating in the West, has undergone substantial revision. Since the 1960s, scholars, such as Stolz and Tanner, along with Luckmann in his book *The Invisible Religion*, have offered strong critiques of the secularization thesis. The once-prevailing belief that religion would inevitably decline alongside modernization has been increasingly challenged.⁹

On the contrary, as described by researchers Stolz and Tanner proponents of *market theory* and *rational choice theory*, such as Iannaccone and Stark and Finke, argue that modernization does not necessarily lead to a decline in religiosity. They suggest that state interference in the religious sphere could result in *desacralization* rather than genuine secularism, and that religion continues to adapt and thrive in new forms even in modern societies.¹⁰

Consequently, it is now widely accepted among scholars that secularization occurs on multiple levels: technical, institutional-cultural, and spatial. This multidimensional understanding allows for a more nuanced interpretation of the state's relationship with religion in specific national contexts.

To better understand the modern state's engagement with religion, it is useful to turn to the work of prominent anthropologist Talal Asad. Asad proposed a critical, anthropological interpretation of secularism - not merely as the separation of religious and state institutions but as a political and cultural framework that redefines, transcends, and differentiates.¹¹ As Sabet (2006) noted, Asad views secularism as a "redefining, transcending, and differentiating political medium."¹²

This interpretation positions secularism not as a static doctrine but as a dynamic and context-sensitive system of governance. From this perspective, secularism in Kazakhstan can be understood as a flexible tool of state management - one that enables constructive engagement with traditional Islam while preserving principles of religious equality and non-interference.

In independent Kazakhstan, the ideological foundation of state-confessional relations continues to evolve in response to both internal dynamics and broader global developments. The 1990s marked the beginning of a "religious revival" in Kazakhstan, as in many other post-Soviet countries. During this period, religious associations began to re-establish themselves legally and construct places of worship. A renewed spiritual search among the population emerged, while a shortage of qualified domestic religious scholars led to an increase in Kazakhstani youth studying in foreign religious institutions. Geographically, the varying spread of Islam across the country influenced how the religion manifested in different regions of Kazakhstan.

The newfound religious freedom, extended to organizations, such as Islamic groups, Protestant denominations, and new religious movements, brought with it significant challenges for Kazakh society. While this freedom marked a break from the former regime's total control, it also enabled the emergence of potentially destabilizing ideologies. One preventative factor, however, was the prohibition of legally forming religious political parties. This legislative measure helped to curtail the politicization of Islam. The rationale behind such restrictions can be traced to the unrest in

⁹Stolz and Tanner, "Secularization, Secularity."

¹⁰Ibid., 5.

¹¹Khan, "Thinking about Secularism with Asad."

¹²Amr G. E. Sabet, "Formations of the Secular by Talal Asad," *American Journal of Islam and Society* 23, no. 4 (2006): 112–114, <https://doi.org/10.35632/ajis.v23i4.1585>

neighboring countries during the 1990s, particularly in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, where religiously-motivated political movements contributed to significant instability. In response, the Uzbek government imposed strict control over religious life, subjecting all Islamic groups to state scrutiny.¹³

Since its independence in 1991, the Republic of Kazakhstan was officially designated as a multi-confessional, multi-ethnic, and secular state. With 124 ethnic groups represented, approximately 69.3% of the population adheres to Islam and 17.2% to Christianity.¹⁴ Although no religion holds official state status, Islam is widely recognized as a key element of national identity among the Kazakh majority.

According to researchers, such as Zhussipbek and colleagues, the religious revival in Central Asia followed three key models mentioned as follows:

- The revival of Islam as an ethnically-rooted, de-modernized reaction to Soviet atheism, accompanied by the rise of Salafism;
- The securitization of “unofficial” forms of Islam by state institutions;
- The emergence of conservative Islam aligned with local traditionalist values.¹⁵

In Kazakhstan’s case, the revival maintained continuity with traditional Islamic foundations that had long been embedded in the everyday lives of Kazakhs. This culturally-rooted Islamic tradition, passed down through generations on the Kazakh Steppe, is viewed as a protective factor against radical and destructive deviations. It is likely, in our view, that Kazakh society would continue to gravitate towards this orientation, using tradition as a safeguard against extremist ideologies.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan, like Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, and others, faced a shared challenge: defining its religious identity and creating legal mechanisms for religious regulation. The sudden re-emergence of religion in public life, following decades of state atheism, produced not only positive spiritual renewal but also destabilizing trends. The spread of foreign religious ideologies and radical movements - amplified by low levels of religious literacy - became a common concern across the region.¹⁶

A thorough review of the conditions that enabled the ideology of Salafism and similar radical movements to gain a foothold in Kazakhstan reveals the ways in which these groups sought to challenge and undermine traditional religious practices. Analyzing these developments allows for a clearer differentiation between traditional religious organizations and those with conservative or radical agendas.

3.1. Causes and Consequences of the Spread of Radical Religious Movements in Kazakhstan

Radicalism began to emerge in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and neighboring states, with a key indicator being the rise of Islamist groups commonly referred to as “Wahhabism.”. Wahhabism, which originated as a religious-political movement in Saudi Arabia in the mid-18th century, developed within the framework of the Hanbali school of Sunni Islam.¹⁷ It is important to note that the predominant Islamic tradition in Central Asia follows the Hanafi school.

¹³Ohlsson, “Islam and Secular State,” 486.

¹⁴Bureau of national Statistics, Republic of Kazakhstan, (2021).

¹⁵Gabit Zhussipbek, Dilfuza Achilov, and Zhamilya Nagayeva, “Some Common Patterns of Islamic Revival in Post-Soviet Central Asia and Challenges to Develop Human Rights and Inclusive Society.” *Religions* 11, no. 11 (2020): 548, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11110548>.

¹⁶Bedford, Mahmudlu, and Abilov, “Protecting Nation.” 700-702.

¹⁷Sultangalieva, Islam in Kazakhstan, 76.

Modern Islamic scholars, especially those advocating for traditionalist positions, frequently categorize Muslim thought into three main orientations: *fundamentalism*, *modernism*, and *traditionalism*. In some academic works, a fourth strand - *secularism* or even *Mahdism*—is added to the typology of Islamic ideologies.¹⁸ Within this framework, traditional Islam is positioned as a global community grounded in heritage and continuity; fundamentalism is defined by its strict, dogmatic worldview; and modernism attempts to reinterpret Islamic principles in response to contemporary challenges.

However, it is important to note that these classifications, while helpful for general analysis, are not exhaustive. They often fail to account for the nuanced and dynamic nature of Islamic beliefs and practices across different contexts. The following sections of this study examined *traditionalism* and *modernism* in greater depth. In this section, however, the focus remained on *fundamentalist perspectives* to identify the root causes of radicalism within Kazakhstan.

According to Munson (2023), the term *Islamic fundamentalism* is often misleading. He increasingly advocates using more precise terms, such as *Islamism* or *Islamist movements*. These terms better capture the political dimensions of the phenomenon. Islamism, in particular, is characterized by the aspiration to establish an Islamic state governed by *Shariah* law. As defined by Z.I. Levin, Islamism is a comprehensive ideological project aimed at reshaping the world based on the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).¹⁹ It is seen by many of its adherents as a response to the perceived failures of secularism, nationalism, and globalization.

Although not all Muslims subscribe to this worldview, Levin argues that the idea holds appeal for millions across the Islamic world. However, Islamism is a highly complex and contested concept, and scholars caution against conflating moderate Islamists with extremists or equating political Islam with terrorism. Islamists span a wide ideological spectrum, encompassing diverse views on political participation, violence, reform, and religious practice.²⁰

Islamist organizations, including religious political parties, began to proliferate across Central Asia, particularly through the All-Union Party of Islamic Revival in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. However, these organizations were subsequently banned. The so-called “Wahhabites,” who sought to establish what they considered a “true Islamic society,” posed a serious threat to Central Asian states and provoked significant consequences.

Several factors contributed to the spread of Wahhabite ideology in Kazakhstan. According to domestic political scientist Satpayev, the spread of religious extremist ideologies in Kazakhstan began in the 1990s via religious education centers in the southern states. In the 2000s, such influences extended to the western regions, primarily originating from Russia and the North Caucasus, unfolding in three distinct stages linked to the activities of terrorist organizations. The expert also criticized the state for its delayed response and reluctance to heed expert warnings regarding the escalation of this issue.²¹

Satpayev categorized armed radical clandestine organizations into three main types: foreign (or “varyag”) groups, autochthonous local extremist associations, and networked radical groups. The first category comprises foreign entities funded from abroad, such as *Hizb ut-Tahrir* and *Tablighi*

¹⁸Jason Idriss Sparkes, “Morocco as a Hub of Globalized Traditional Islam,” *Religions* 13, no. 5 (2022): 392, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13050392>

¹⁹Hnery Munson, “Fundamentalism,” *Britannica*, last modified November 26, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/fundamentalism>

²⁰Baitenova and Zhorabek, “Islamism, the Main Stages,” 5.

²¹Vladimir Demidov, “Geography of Extremism in Kazakhstan,” *365info.kz*, November 20, 2017, <https://365info.kz/2017/11/geografiya-ekstremizma-v-kazahstane>.

Jamaat. Autochthonous groups are locally-based extremist associations, often sponsored by legitimate businesses and linked to criminal activity. Network radical groups operate through various extremist websites and are reportedly responsible for terrorist attacks in Aktobe.²²

As a result, citizens who were ideologically influenced by radical extremist organizations within the country, whose minds were poisoned, committed terrorist acts. The first terrorist attack in Kazakhstan occurred in 2011 in Aktobe, when a 25-year-old perpetrator detonated himself, injuring three others. According to the National Security Committee, the individual was affiliated with the group “Ansar Ud-Din.” Subsequent terrorist attacks took place in 2011 in Taraz, 2012 in Atyrau, and 2016 in Aktobe, resulting in multiple casualties. All perpetrators involved in these attacks were identified as adherents of the Salafist movement.²³

Moreover, the active activities of Salafist movements have led to the departure of several Kazakh citizens to Syria for the purpose of engaging in “jihad.” Of particular concern is that many took their wives and children with them thus, exposing these women and children to extremist ideology and placing their lives in jeopardy. Within the so-called “Islamic Caliphate,” Kazakh citizens, especially women and children, who are prepared to live according to Islamic principles and make sacrifices for religion, find themselves in extremely difficult circumstances.

In response, Kazakhstan launched the special operation “Zhusan” in 2019, initiated by First President Nursultan Nazarbayev as part of a broader plan developed since 2018. Named after a symbolic steppe plant representing homeland and memory, the operation aimed to repatriate citizens from war zones. Resistance to extremism in Kazakhstan has been shaped by low religious literacy, socio-economic challenges, and identity loss among the population.

The Salafist ideology, which seeks a return to the “original, pure” form of Islam in fundamentalist terms, claims that “Kazakhs are only taking the first steps towards Islam and that national traditions contradict the core principles of Islam.”

Kenzhetai provides the following rebuttal:

This is fundamentally incorrect. Islam arrived in our land in the late 7th to early 8th centuries, following the famous Battle of Talas in 751. The worldview, culture, lifestyle, traditions, customs, and language of the Kazakhs have all been shaped under the influence of Islam. Hence, when confronted with the norms and practices of extremist radical groups, it is essential to compare these with the foundations of Kazakh identity. For instance, extremists regard the “betashar” ritual as incorrect, yet this ritual represents one of the greatest values of Kazakh national identity. It involves the meeting of two families, their becoming relatives, and the bestowing of blessings upon their children. The young bride enters her new home with a greeting gesture. The very word “Salaam” derives from the Muslim greeting “Assalamu Alaikum.” However, radicals misconstrue this as shirk (idolatry). In fact, Kazakh Muslim identity is deeply embedded in such everyday traditions.²⁴

Furthermore, Professor John Esposito’s analysis of the use of Islamic dogmas to justify holy war (*jihad*), particularly the calls by some groups to return to the “Golden Age” of Islam, accurately reflects the situation in Kazakhstan.²⁵ Parray (2014) noted that Esposito presents Islam and other

²²Kazis Toguzbayev, “The Aftermath of the Shootings in Aktobe and Almaty,” *Radio Azattyq*, 22 December, 2016, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-terakty-2016/28189230.html>.

²³National Security Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan, accessed January 13, 2025, <https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/knb/press/news/details/291882?lang=en&ysclid=m4h6m1w7ig498822259>.

²⁴Esenalieva, “Dosai Kenzhetai: We Need to Develop a Scientific Approach to the Spiritual Heritage of Our Ancestors.”

²⁵Raaj Kumar Shukul, “Article Review of 'Islam and Political Violence' by John L. Esposito,” *ResearchGate*, September 2022,

religions as not only sources of compassion, morality, and kindness but also as sources of terror, injustice, and oppression. Consequently, the researcher advocates for ongoing theological, doctrinal, and educational reforms within Islam that promote tolerance and religious pluralism, highlighting the need to consider the future of Islam and its evolving relationship with the state.²⁶

Living in a region where different worldviews and religious beliefs converge, the Kazakh people have preserved the Islamic religion to this day only through their national traditions, which have developed over the centuries-old history. Only tradition can prevent radical ideologies and help to filter out foreign trends. Based on the Hanafi madhhab of Islam, and the Maturidi Creed, the Kazakh people were able to form their own identity and synthesize the way of life with Islam as a whole. Such an established, centuries-old history was rejected by radical groups and poisoned the minds of young people. They had the most negative impact on the loss of their uniqueness, the denial of tradition, and history.²⁷ Given that young people are currently more adaptable to any ideas and trends, many experts argue that young people reject the position of uniqueness. For instance, the Russian researcher Fedorova currently promotes the formation of a new type of identity — cyberunit, and defines young people based on the research and observations.²⁸

In Kazakhstan, as the official representative of the Islamic religion in the country, the Republican Islamic Association “SAMK” conducts religious activities. A set of measures is also carried out on the part of the clergy to prevent radical ideologies. Table 1 shows the main areas of Spiritual Administration service.²⁹

Table 1. Key Performance Indicators of the SAMK.

#	Main Directions of the Activity of the SAMK	Key Performance Indicators (2024-2025y.)
1	Work of information and explanatory groups to prevent radicalism;	10,854 individual actions of influence (personal meetings).
2	Conducting a religious expertise of religious literature of Islamic content;	The assessment analyzed 493 books
3	Promotion of traditional sermons among young people;	muftayat.kz published 1,646 news articles, 128 articles, 18 fatwas, 56 questions and answers, and 60 videos on the official website
4	Activities of the “Council of Aksakals” to keep the continuity of traditions.	Consultative meetings are held on a regular basis

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/375089304_Article_Review_of_Islam_and_Political_Violence' by John L. Esposito.](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/375089304_Article_Review_of_Islam_and_Political_Violence_by_John_L_Esposito)

²⁶Tauseef Ahmad Parry, “*The Future of Islam* by John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 234.” *American Journal of Islam and Society* 31, no. 2 (2014): 142–144. <https://doi.org/10.35632/ajis.v31i2.1051>

²⁷Yulya Shapoval, “Involvement of Kazakhstani Women in the ISIS Terrorist Organization: Identity Factor,” *Eurasian Journal of Religious Studies* 38, no. 2 (2024): 3-15, <https://doi.org/10.26577/EJRS.2024.v38.i2.r1>.

²⁸Marina Fedorova, “Religious Identity in the Modern Digital World,” *Sociodynamics* 6 (2020): 66–79, <https://doi.org/10.25136/2409-7144.2020.6.33085>.

²⁹“Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan,” *Annual Report 2024: 27k Content Published on Religious Administration Websites*. Accessed January 20, 2025, <https://www.muftayat.kz/kk/news/qmdb/2025-01-11/45887-zhyildy-e-sep-2024-dni-basarma-sajttaryina-27-myi-kontent-zharyalandyi/>.

#	Main Directions of the Activity of the SAMK	Key Performance Indicators (2024-2025y.)
5	Naming newly built mosques in the country to glorify the Kazakh people and Islamic scholars;	Newly built mosques are increasingly named after Kazakh Islamic scholars and public figures
6	Active maintenance of official social pages that provide information about traditional Islam, considering the activity of young people in social networks.	26,407 materials were published. The Mufti's official website was viewed by 5 million people between January 1 and December 31, 2024.

In general, certain official documents or publications are one of the tools that contribute to the correct orientation of believers, and they are also effectively used in international practice. For instance, in Jordan, one of the international publications developed by the globalized traditional Islamic discourse is the Muslim 500: the World's 500 Most Influential Muslims. Another publication of the Royal Institute of Islamic Thought, *Aal Al-Bayt*, there was the Amman Message in 2006, a declaration approved by more than 500 Islamic scholars from all over the world.³⁰

Another key area of research is how Islamic media and organizations use the Internet to meet their communication needs. A major goal is to counter “false information about Islam,” particularly the spread of Wahhabism, which can harm Islam's image. Due to lingering Islamophobia in post-Soviet media, many Muslims turn to the Internet to fight information bias. In response, even Islamic states are working to use online platforms to accurately present Islam and combat negative stereotypes.

Several crucial factors have influenced the exposure of citizens to radicalism and have led them to lose their identity and lose themselves in social life. This situation has undermined the stability of the state, and the formation of a normal religious environment. People could not accept the fact that the radicals maintained a “pure religion,” in addition to their migration to Syria, their denial of the centuries-old Kazakh traditions, and from that moment on, a tendency began to exclude and alienate them from them. This is because the Kazakh people did not recognize such traditions as “consecration of the Koran to the spirits and the dead,” “baking shelppek on Friday,” (the tradition of cooking flatbread in oil for the consecration of the Koran in memory of the dead), “Salem Salu,” of the newly arrived bride (the commits shirk on the Wahhabi side), which were formed in the southern regions of Kazakhstan, became a cumulative period, which showed their radicalization.

Therefore, most of the radical youth, who did not receive support from representatives of the older generation, tried to seek support and protection by creating a “hijra,” for a “real, pure Islamic State.” Therefore, in strengthening the sense of identity of citizens, adherence to traditions and customs is important.

4. Traditional Islam as a Strategy to Preserve National Identity and Resist Radicalism

To counter the activities of radicalistic organizations, it was necessary to implement a set of measures organized by the state, comprehensively worked out, theoretically, and practically justified. Seeing the negative impact of extremist and radical movements, the states began to work out their strategies and counterstrategies.

In many European countries, anti-radicalization initiatives are aimed at specific immigrant communities, based on the assumption that their lack of social and economic integration into society makes them vulnerable to radical programs. Additionally, in the Republic of Azerbaijan, which is one of the post-Soviet countries, a set of measures was carried out by the state on this issue. The main emphasis in the state was placed on the direction of “traditional Islam” and “Sunni Islam,” and

³⁰Sparkes, “Morocco as a Hub,” 392.

religious situation in this direction was also considered. In Azerbaijani society, traditional Islam was seen as a strategy against radicalization from a global perspective³¹.

For instance, in 2016, the President of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov held a World Islamic Conference with the participation of renowned Islamic scholars and figures from around the world. The conference discussed the definition of the concept of “Sunni people and Sunni community,” in connection with the spread of takfiri Salafi terrorism. As a result, a resolution (fatwa) was signed to remove Salafi Wahhabism from Sunnism. The document states that only Asharites, Maturidis, four madhabs, and Sufi tariqats are officially attributed to Sunnis.³² Salafism has also been banned in neighboring states of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. In Uzbekistan, regular monitoring of citizens is carried out, including the ban on wearing beards and black hijabs, which are characteristics of the Salafist movement.³³

Central Asian countries have increasingly emphasized traditional Islam as a stabilizing force and a counter to radical ideologies. Studies, including interviews with former radicals, show that many individuals abandoned their social, religious, and national identities in pursuit of what they believed to be religious truth. Several factors contributed to this:

- Many young people involved in terrorism or who joined the Syrian conflict (aged 25–41) were raised by parents from the Soviet era who lacked religious practice, making them more susceptible to rapid ideological shifts.
- These youth often rejected traditional customs and aligned with radical views, creating conflict with older generations and deepening their sense of alienation from society.
- Socio-economic hardships, youth unemployment, and easy access to unfiltered religious content online also accelerated their radicalization and group formation.

In general, the concept of traditionalism or traditional Islam is defined in each region according to the history, religious identity, traditions, and customs of the place. It is known that this was considered by several researchers from the same regions.³⁴ If we consider the concepts within the framework of scientific research, traditionalism dates from the early XX century when Rene Gougeon founded the school in the West. Although there is no commonality among great thinkers on this school in defining traditionalism, there is a consensus on the difference between the concept of tradition in everyday life and the traditionalist school. However, Muslims associated with this community do not form a formal institution or organization; they are participants in an informal network.³⁵

At the same time, the famous Iranian scientist Nasr Seyyed Hossein, a researcher of traditionalism on a scientific basis, defined traditionalism as not a ritual passed down from generation to generation but a spiritual being, a concept associated with God. Nasr explains the difference between a traditionalist and a Traditionalist as follows: one as a follower of his traditions and customs, and the other as a person who feels Holiness, the meaning of religious revelation. Traditionalists can express their views in many areas, from philosophy to art, from architecture to

³¹Bedford, Mahmudlu, and Abilov, “Protecting Nation,” 693.

³²Michael Kemper, “Religious Political Technology: Damir Mukhetdinov’s ‘Russian Islam’,” *Religion, State and Society* 47, no. 2 (2019): 214, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2019.1571331>

³³Michael Kirillov, “No Hijabs, no Beards! How Central Asian Authorities Combat Radical Islam without Fear of Offending Believers?” *Lenta.ru*, 15 March, 2024, <https://lenta.ru/articles/2024/03/15/fundamentalizm/>

³⁴Bedford, Mahmudlu, and Abilov, “Protecting Nation,” 705.

³⁵Sparkes, “Morocco as a Hub,” 390.

literature, and defend tradition. In the school of traditionalism, tradition often means eternal wisdom, metaphysics, and *ad-Din*.³⁶

Therefore, according to Sparkes, it is necessary to convey the sacred tradition through Fiqh, Aqidah, and Tasawwuf. The danger of the modernist direction is also contrasted by Nasr with the Traditionalist, which breaks the connection with divine transcendence and leads to the emergence of world problems³⁷. In turn, the researcher Fauzi (2013) argued that traditionalism and modernism were used in Western science to define the framework of Islam. These conclusions align with the concept proposed by researcher W. Hallaq, who argues that the modern state and *Shari'ah* are incompatible due to their fundamental divergence.³⁸

Muminov Ashirbek, a well-known scientist, doctor, professor, and religious scholar, established that there was a scientific tradition of Fiqh in Central Asia (based on the works of Al-Kafawi), and there were 221 *faqih*s in these regions that contributed to the formation and spread of the Hanafi maze³⁹. According to the scientists, the study of the history of Islam in Central Asia makes it possible to understand the formation of regional features of Islam and their interaction with general Islamic principles, as well as the functioning of Islam as a complex ideological system.⁴⁰

Along with that, within the framework of “Traditional Islam” discourse, independent Kazakh researcher Zhusipbek, Nagaeva (2018) argues that the understanding of traditional Islam in Central Asian states is too dogmatic. Moreover, it was also argued that representatives of traditionalism have an excessive tendency towards legalism, formalism, archaism, and reliance on “templates” and “patterns.” Therefore, to prevent traditional Islam from falling into crisis, researchers emphasize the need for radical and transformative reforms.⁴¹

Through such historical prisms, one can trace the significance and specifics of traditional Islam in Kazakhstan. At the same time, the main directions of the state's policy in the field of religion, considering the traditional characteristics of the people living on the territory of the country, have been found.

4.1. Religious Studies Expertise as a Measure of Preventing Religious Radicalism

The main prerequisite for the registration of religious denominations in the Republic of Kazakhstan on a legal basis is the expertise of their activities and the religious literature used by them in religious studies.

The study found that in Central Asia, along with missionaries from outside, their religious literature and materials on the Internet contributed to the spread of religious radicalism. New religious organizations have appeared in Kazakhstan, which have aroused the interest and support of citizens who do not have a religious education. The state was faced with the task of checking the activities of religious associations registered and applying for registration, as well as the content of the materials used by them and identifying the presence of extremist appeals. This determined the need and relevance of conducting the religious studies expertise. The state's efforts to maintain stability are often perceived by international organizations as involving strict control over religious freedom.

³⁶Vural, “Seyyed Hossein Nasr,” 127.

³⁷Sparkes, “Morocco as a Hub,” 393.

³⁸Fauzi, “The Roles of Kyai,” 126-127.

³⁹Muminov, *Hanafitskiy Mazhab*, 253.

⁴⁰Ibid., 253-254.

⁴¹Zhusipbek and Nagayeva, “On 'Traditional Islam.'”

For the first time in Kazakhstan, the religious studies expertise began in 2007. Based on the expert opinion, the authorized body makes an appropriate decision on state registration (re-registration) of a religious association by the legislation of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Zabiyako Andrei, having considered the main problems of modern religious studies, noted that the field of expertise is a relevant and key area. According to the researcher's conclusion, if the fundamental branch expertise of religious studies is theoretical and scientifically substantiated, then religious assessment as an applied branch of religious studies can be called, and there are situations when it, in turn, becomes dependent on the subjective opinion of the expert.⁴²

In the Republic of Kazakhstan, representatives of religious associations are not involved as experts, and the requirements for experts are fixed by a special regulatory document. Therefore, there is no question that religious representatives may give an unambiguous opinion regarding the expert opinion. Since the religious studies expertise is related to the sphere of state-confessional relations, it is not allowed to entrust expert activities to a representative of a particular religious association, which cannot only violate the principle of independent expert but also create interreligious tension. The expert's worldview is neutral and tolerant, and his activities should be guided only by scientific knowledge and legal norms.⁴³

In addition, religious studies expertise conducted at the state level is overseen by the SAMK, which is responsible for examining the theological content of materials and publications to prevent radicalism. At this point, it is important to clarify the distinction between religious studies expertise and religious expertise. As previously discussed, religious studies expertise focuses on verifying compliance with legal requirements and employs methods of academic research to analyze materials from all religious denominations. When necessary, the process may also involve specialists such as theologians, psychologists, lawyers, and political scientists. The statistical data of the conducted studies are presented in the Table 2.

Table 2. Indicators of the religious studies expertise conducted by the authorized body in the field of religion to date

Period	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Number of religious materials on which the expertise was carried out	3419	2867	449	4332	3790	247	1779	1121	2245	707	1779

The competent state bodies and the religious administration granted imams the right to enroll in bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs offered at the Department of Islamic Studies and Religious Studies of the "Nur-Mubarak University," opened in Kazakhstan jointly with the Islamic State of Egypt, considering the earlier level of education.

Consequently, on behalf of the state, the authorized body in the field of religion performs such functions as an expertise of religious studies, registration of religious associations, foreign

⁴²Andrey Zabiyako, "Study of Religion as a Strict Science," *Concept: Philosophy, Religion, Culture* 3, (2019): 47-64, <https://doi.org/10.24833/2541-8831-2019-3-11-47-64>.

⁴³Lyazzat Kalybekova, and Kalmakhan Yerzhan, "Theoretical and Practical Bases of Religious Assessment in the Republic of Kazakhstan," *Eurasian Journal of Religious Studies* 36, no. 4 (2023): 14-23, <https://doi.org/10.26577/EJRS.2023.v36.i4.r2>.

missionaries, work of information and explanatory groups, spiritual-religious educational institutions, and communication with religious associations.

Additionally, the Committee on Religious Affairs of the Ministry of Culture and Information coordinates the work of local executive bodies to prevent religious extremism in the Internet space. For the 4th quarter of 2024, 6626 materials in various formats (video, photo, text) were prepared. These would be used in the work on the prevention of religious extremism and terrorism, promotion of interfaith harmony, and strengthening the secular values of Kazakhstan's society.⁴⁴

The state prioritizes Islam, with 2,847 religious associations, and collaborates closely with the clergy to address shared goals—such as countering radicalization, preserving Kazakh traditions, strengthening national identity, and promoting interreligious harmony. This joint approach has yielded results, including efforts to reintegrate citizens returning from war zones by guiding them back to the traditional Hanafi madhhab with the help of religious scholars and experts.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be argued that the fight against radicalism in the conditions of Kazakhstan, as well as the preservation of national identity, requires the continuation of large-scale work on the state-confessional relationship, especially within the framework of traditional Islam. At the same time, the practical application of traditional Islam in Kazakhstan's society and the potential indicators of the Islamic religion in the implementation of the state's religious policy in the prevention of radicalism were analyzed.

Despite critical opinions regarding traditionalism, the experts and representatives of historical theories analysed in the study came to conclusion that traditional Islam in Kazakhstan is better understood through a historical prism than through a political aspect.

It can be assumed that the above-mentioned concept of traditionalism, “sacral, transcendent,” was realized in the Kazakh steppe through the Sufi tradition. An important aspect of the current research is the implementation of traditional Islam in Kazakhstan's society on a practical basis, the analysis of its potential for uniting society in preserving national identity and interreligious harmony, and the interests of the state.

An important point is that Professor Talal Asad's examination of the possible consequences of sanctioned cruelty and violence within secularism suggests that the comprehensive measures taken to prevent radical ideology in Kazakhstan are moving in the right direction. This is because the conclusions reached by scholars who have examined the relationship between the state and Islam tend to converge on a common pathway: rational reform, a proper understanding of religious pluralism, and the cultivation of critical thinking.

The official representation of Islam in Kazakhstan within the framework of the activities of the SAMK, the foundations of the practical implementation of traditional Islam in society, were determined.

Considering the importance of the traditions and customs of the Kazakh nation, which have been firmly adhered to for centuries, their synthesis with the Islamic religion would have an impact on the further strengthening of national identity. Resultantly, the widespread development of Kazakhstan's national branding can be shown (this is the priority of national clothing models among the population, the development of the national food industry, etc.). At the same time, the active use of the potential of the digital world by *Muftiate* contributes to the fact that believers receive prompt and consistent information.

⁴⁴“Religion sphere,” Committee on Religious Affairs of the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan, accessed December 29, 2024, <https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/din/activities/141?lang=ru>.

Authors Contribution

Lyazzat Kalybekova: Formal analysis, Writing – original draft. **Kalmakhan Yerzhan:** Conceptualization, Project administration, Writing – review & editing. **Alau Adilbayev:** investigation. **Yernar Yessimkulov:** resources. **Shamshat Adilbayeva:** validation

Conflict of Interest

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

Data Availability

The data associated with this study would be provided by the corresponding author upon request.

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