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# ISLAMIC MOVEMENTS AND URGENT ISSUES OF THE MODERN KAZAKHSTAN

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## **Abstract**

The article deals with the specific and urgent issues of Islamic movements in the present-day Kazakhstan. The research shows the negative influence of such Islamic movements, spread throughout the Republic. The paper describes the origins of these Islamic movements, their missionary work and other activities in the Republic of Kazakhstan. The authors examine the destructive effect of such Islamist movements as Hizb-ut-Tahrir and Salafism on the republic's territory, and highlight the problem of religious literacy. The paper includes current statistics and information on measures taken by the authorities concerning the issue under consideration. The authors examine reasons for the spread of new Islamic movements in Kazakh society and give a number of suggestions on how to prevent their growth. The article aims at preventing the spread of extremist and terrorist doctrines through information about Islamic movements of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

*Keywords:* unconventional, Islamic movements, missionary, terrorism, extremism

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## **1. Introduction**

Islamic movements and organizations are one of the most urgent issues for political and social discussions in Kazakhstan and on the global level nowadays. It happens because different political and ideological forces use religion in their own interest; they break traditional religious stereotypes and cause danger to the society safety. The forces that are using religion as a cover caused the religious revival in the society and the Islamic revival in particular. However, it is not correct to limit the process only by external factors. It should not be denied that the increasing influence of religious factor in the society is also affected by the state internal conditions including geography, economy, spiritual and political factors.

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As an independent state the Republic of Kazakhstan has declared Islam and Orthodox Christianity as traditional religions for the state that made a great impact on formation of spiritual and cultural values of the our citizens. But along these two world religions, other religions, previously unknown to Kazakhstan, entered the country. This gave a rise to the development of occultism and mysticism studies in the Republic.

## **2. Features of Islamic movements in the Republic of Kazakhstan and their destructive influence**

The increasing number of new religious movements based on mysticism and radicalism should be allocated to the 1990s. Different religious groups and organizations that have been created and functioned on the territory of Kazakhstan had various characteristics, structures and ideological principles [1]. Now we can speak about the danger of spreading of a so-called 'true Islam' by new Islamic movements on the territory of Kazakhstan. It consists from the poor literacy of the majority of the population regarding foundations of an Islam that can be considered as a traditional form for Kazakhstan – we are talking about Sunni Islam of Ḥanafī madhhab. Foreign Islamic missionaries call to come back the Islam of the prophet Muhammad time. Common people can hardly differ one from the other that is why the present situation in Kazakhstan is characterized by rising of activities of radical religious groups and their centres, increasing influence of foreign Islamic missionary movements, and widening of the social base of religious movements. The increasing power of destructive movements causes many worries. The dangers of new Islamic movements spreading in different regions of the Republic can be specified as following:

- religion is presented to young people of Kazakhstan as a value oriented concept, a model of social life, a communication psychology model and a philosophical view of life;
- the society suffers negative impacts of mixing traditional religion and new religious movements;
- is created the impression that the only 'true Islam' is the one of the period of the prophet Muhammad's life;
- the adherents of this type of Islam isolate themselves from the society and cause division of the population, thus provoking conflicts;
- new Islamic movements opposes the political system of secular state, thus threatening national security;
- protagonists of 'true Islam' propagate against the secular state system, patriotism, family values, claiming that the secular state principles contradict religion;
- many conflicts arise among criticizes regarding a so-called conflict between local traditions, customs, art, etc. and an 'Islam';
- those who call others kafirun (infidels) because they do not comply with those new Islamic movements requirements, contribute to inter-religious conflicts;

- a threat of terroristic and extremist acts on religious bases is growing;
- a specific interpretation of jihad concept that those persons are ready to sacrifice their lives in the name of religion [[http://din.gov.kz/rus/press-sluzhba/spisok\\_zaprexhennyx\\_organizaci/?cid=0&page=1#](http://din.gov.kz/rus/press-sluzhba/spisok_zaprexhennyx_organizaci/?cid=0&page=1#)].

The activities of new Islamic movements currently present on the territory of the Republic of Kazakhstan are strictly controlled by the state government. Thus the Supreme Court of the Republic of Kazakhstan has banned a number of terrorist and extremist religious organizations in the Republic of Kazakhstan. The list includes 19 new Islamic organizations and 2 organizations of occult and mystical nature. Among 18 different denominations which are legally registered in the Republic of Kazakhstan, there are 2405 Islamic religious associations [2].

Such a wide variety of various Islamic movements on the territory of the republic makes experts and scholars focus on the problem of their missionary activity and its consequences. We will consider some of them and we will start with Salafism.

The spread of Salafism in Kazakhstan has begun in 1990, when Tajikistan and Fergana export routes reached the republic. Back in the 80s the Wahhabi emirs entered the neighbouring country and opened their offices there. Some Kazakh and Russian media published information that the Salafists had appeared in Kazakhstan in 1997-1998 and got widely spread in the Mangistau region. At this time, the development of gas deposits started in Karashyganak where invited foreign workers from the Arabian Peninsula were a part of working teams. A former Chairman of the National Security Committee Nartay Dutbaev in the interview with the newspaper 'Kazakhstanskaya pravda' said, "In 2004 Karashyganak's 23 foreign workers, who turned out to be members of *Muslim Brotherhood* and *Asbat al' Ansar* were deported from the country. After the adoption of the Law on combating extremism, some barriers to the activity of foreign emissaries and members of radical groups were raised. Now we have a right to prohibit servtain people entering the country, thus resisting the propaganda of their ideas among the population." [3]

Young people aged 20-30 years were committed to Salafism and became very active in this field. As a result, local authorities started the administrative and criminal prosecution, and it helped to decrease Salafi activity Mangistau. According to Alexander Chebotarev, a Kazakhstani politologist, the Kazakh authorities, especially lawmakers, are constantly looking for enemies of the 'constitutional order and legislation' among various groups of the population, especially among believers. "We cannot deny that they are even trying to create a 'new' enemy from the Salafi movement. On the other hand, if some Salafis are ready not only preach illegally, but to take weapons, that is a dangerous sign for the state and society development," said Chebotarev [4].

One of Salafi organizations that is actively promoted in Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, is 'Hizb-ut-Tahrir'. Their writings reveal that they rely more on their own rationality and ideas than on conventional interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunnah. This phenomenon contradicts the foundations of faith and fiqh (legal foundation of Islamic religious, political, and civil life) [5].

Experts have determined extremist parameters after studying propaganda literature and tutorial of the ‘Hizb-ut-Tahrir’ party. The activities of ‘Hizb-ut-Tahrir’ began in the 1990s in the southern regions of Kazakhstan. According to the Ministry of Home Affairs, ‘Hizb-ut-Tahrir’ functioned in the South Kazakhstan from 1990 to 2004 [6]. From 2005, the organization has spread its influence to the whole country. The basic method of the organization for gaining adherents was the distribution of flyers, books, brochures with religious content, as well as videos and audios with extremist content. Many members of ‘Hizb-ut-Tahrir’ have incurred criminal, administrative and legal liabilities for keeping and distributing books, leaflets, and brochures of extremist content. Due to detention of the group members and close supervision of police authorities the current activities of *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* went underground [7].

According to the decision of the Court of Astana on March 28, 2005, this radical organization was included into the list of banned religious organizations of Kazakhstan. Also, the organization was recognized as an extremist one and its activity was strictly forbidden in the country.

In order to determine the effect of such new religious movements on the Kazakhstani people, we need to consider some aspects of worldview. For example, *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* declares to be a ‘political party with Islamic ideology’. The purpose of the party is to revert Muslims to the Islamic way of life (all daily actions should be based on shari’a law) and to spread Islam throughout the world. It should be mentioned that this goal would be fulfilled through the creation of a single theocratic Caliphate state, which will connect the entire Islamic world [B. Karim, *Hizb-ut-Tahrir is a religious extremist organization*, <http://e-islam.kz/dini-radikalizm-qauipteri/item/898-eislam>, 2013].

According to *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* documents, the governments of Muslim countries are not Islamic by nature and character. It is believed that today’s problems of Muslim community occur because of “absence of Islam in daily life”, as well as due to “lack of Islamic ruling system” [8].

The main purpose of *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* is to unite Islamic nations into a single Islamic state or Caliphate, led by an elected caliph. The party favours for creating a Caliphate in peaceful way and intends to accede all Muslim majority countries into the Caliphate by which meant a type of a state structure that existed in the Golden Period of Islam until European colonization of the Middle East. The Caliphate idea is not unique for *Hizb-ut-Tahrir*, it is just an integration of what is widely spread among Muslims (Agreement on ‘Hizb-ut-Tahrir’ organization, 2013).

In order to achieve the goal, the organization developed three stages:

1. Creation of the *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* association whose members would support each other and work together with the Prophet Muhammad followers. Goals and objectives of the association are perceived to be personal ones for every member, who is ready to work hard in order to reach these goals.
2. Formation of public opinion on the Caliphate and other Islamic concepts among Muslims, thus shaping the idea of Islamic heritage relevance for the current moment.

3. Receiving supported of military generals, leaders and others in order to carry out a coup d'état. Government will be formed according to the Islamic model, and formation of an Islamic state will bring Islam to the ends of the world. The party does not specify the terms of Caliphate formation, and completely relies on Allah's help in this matter [9].

The latter Caliphate state was disintegrated to such countries as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco. Now they differ from each other in terms of economy, political structure, the level of democracy development and civil society institutions. This diversity is also reflected in the countries' names (republic, monarchy, sultanate, etc.). The ethnic and religious composition is also different. Each of these countries have its own national and socio-cultural characteristics, traditions, customs, philosophy, views on the events taking place in the world. There were some misunderstandings and clashes between the major countries within last years. For example, the war between Iran and Iraq in the early 1980s. This conflict of the twentieth century killed millions of people [10].

The dispersed Caliphate members from the Middle East and North Africa now highly value their independence and prefer to focus on their own development. And it is hard to believe that people of these countries would easily agree and voluntarily lose their independence, territorial integrity, and follow external laws [11].

According to Nabahani, one of ideologists of *Hizb-ut-Tahrir*, the basic form of the extremist organizations activities is *dawa* (call, appeal). Extremists pay special attention to personal characteristics of those who conduct the propaganda. Those people should have strong faith and intentions to withstand any possible malevolent actions of enemies. He should move forward in his activities, have clear mind, always search for truth and rigorously test his knowledge. He does not have to wait for praise, reward or wealth from other people [12].

In order to understand the destructive nature of *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* we need to know what goals they set for themselves, their ideas and principles. This will help to see the true nature of the religious extremist organization [7].

Considering history of our country, we can subsume all non-traditional religious movements on its territory in 3 time periods:

- 1990-1996: establishing and dissemination of various organizations in Kazakhstan. Security forces did not carry out any control measures.
- 1997-1998: the stage of persistent development and membership increasing in non-traditional religious movements. At this stage, dissemination of pseudo Islamic teachings actively took place among the population.
- 1999- the beginning of 2007: decrease of activities as a consequence of increasing control by the public authorities.

This division into time periods is not absolute, since each has its own characteristics for time and development. In addition, the functional activity of each pseudo Islamic movement is uncertain.

Because of the danger of religious extremism on the territory of Kazakhstan, three factors should be closely considered. Firstly, the activity of pseudo-Islamic movements grows intensely. Secondly, they are mostly spread in the Western, Southern and Central regions of the country. Thirdly, some pseudo-Islamic movements function illegally, and it complicates collection of any information about them.

Analysis of causes and conditions under which pseudo-Islamic movements immerse and develop, revealed how the growth of adherents.

### **3. Social economic factor**

Well-being is the foundation for human moral and spiritual tranquillity. The results of the Gallup research on [www.nomad.su](http://www.nomad.su) prove it to be the same for people of Kazakhstan. The study was conducted in 143 countries around the world, and it showed that if a state is poor, so is its population.

In comparison with other Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan has sustainable economic development and provides some financial support for individuals, families and fields of economy, but it is not enough. That is why declarations of new religious organizations are often sound like social programs in need, but they lead to unrealistic and utopian expectations.

That is why we can conclude that socio-economic instability in Kazakh society enables the development of non-traditional religious movements.

### **4. The methods of dispersion used by non-traditional Islamic movements**

The results of non-traditional Islamic organizations activities show that the use of various methods of attracting people, including active information promotion among young people, gives an opportunity to increase their influence.

This may include holding conferences on specific topics (e.g., religion, the role of Islam in the modern world), various seminars on deeper learning of the basics of Islam, education in foreign Islamic high schools, giving international grants to study at Islamic universities, learning Arabic language, etc. It also contains financial and moral support for the disabled and sick people through donations, assistance in education, creation of youth organizations in educational institutions to preserve the national culture, establishing of public organizations for dissemination of national culture, international grants for studying at Islamic high schools. The ignorance of young people in the field of religion is the main reason for their trust and interest in all these activities.

Unfortunately, the mainstream activities of the state bodies of Kazakhstan in fighting non-traditional Islamic organizations are criminal prosecution and further imprisonment for a long sentence. But international experience, including politics of such neighbouring countries as Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, differ. The reason for an alternative approach is the threat that criminal prosecution used to battle extremist organizations, may have the opposite effect and even create links with law enforcement agencies. Such an

approach is more negative than positive. Besides, it does not deal with the problem's roots, but only strengthens undesirable trends. Experts underline the trend of increasing influence of such radicals in the criminal circles and associated it with the rise of number of practicing individuals who perform daily prayers. In addition, experts inform that the radicals actively work with young people with drug addiction, helping them to find jobs after quitting their habit.

## **5. The results of social survey**

In order to find proofs for these tendencies a social survey was carried out. Its objectives were the following: to identify the public opinion on the adherence to Islam and Islamic movements, the level of religious situation stability, religious literacy of the population, and sources of religious information. Moreover, special attention was given to distinguishing peculiarities of the religious situation in different regions of Kazakhstan. The main target group was citizens and students of Almaty and the survey period was 2011-2012. The reason for choosing these young people is that this group contains representatives of almost every region of our country. From the perspective of social structure of the respondents 90% were young people aged 18-35, and 65% were males [4, p. 104].

### **5.1. 'What is your attitude towards Islam?'**

The answers showed the following distribution (Figure 1):

- I am a Muslim, but I do not follow religious life style - 48%;
- I am a Muslim and fully follow religious life style -15%;
- I am a follower of Islam, I am a part of a religious community and adhere religious rules - 10%;
- I am not a believer, but I respect religious people - 15%;
- I am not a believer and I am against any religion - 5%;
- I am a follower of another religion but have no opinion on Islam - 10%.

One can see the view of respondents on Islam which was shown by different levels of 'religiousness'. Figure 1 also reveals the attitude of people on religion in general.

### **5.2. 'What sources do you use to get information about Islam?'**

The respondents mainly referred to media and the Internet (Figure 2). The figure corresponds to 2012, so now we can assume that the share of Internet has risen considerably. This is a dangerous situation that proves that there is a lack of official sources while there is a big number of pseudo-Islamic websites with uncontrolled distribution of various information.

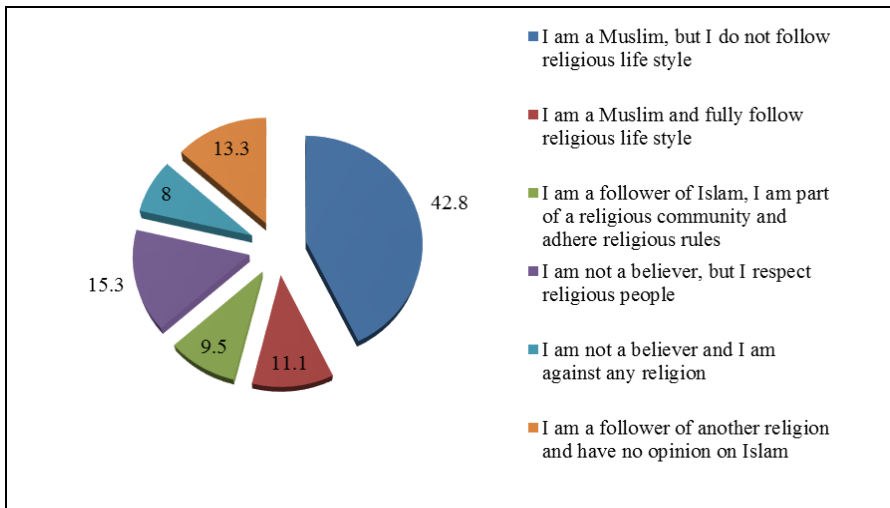


Figure 1. Attitude towards Islam in %.

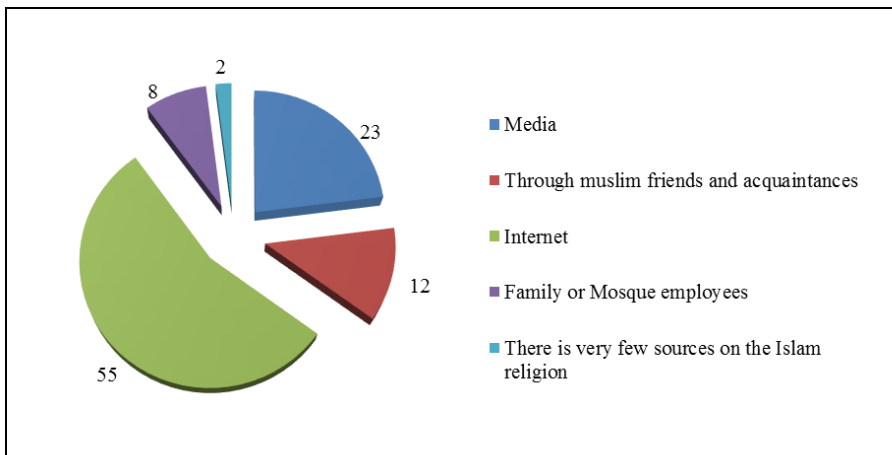
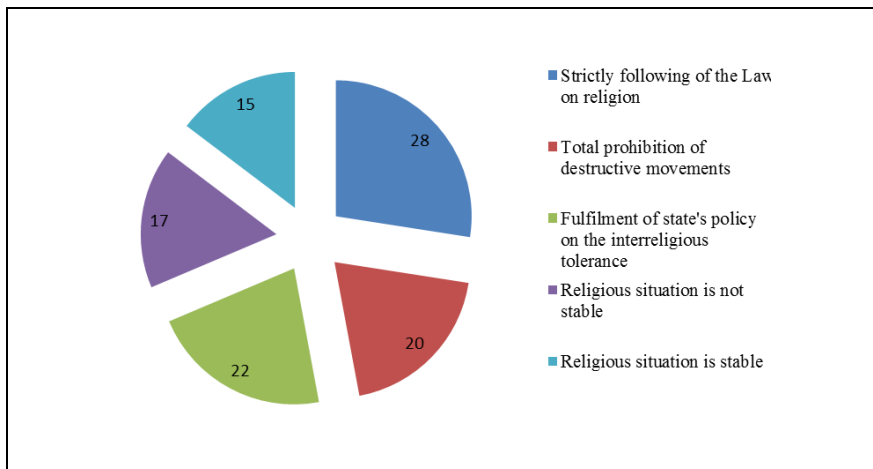


Figure 2. Sources used in getting information about Islam in %.

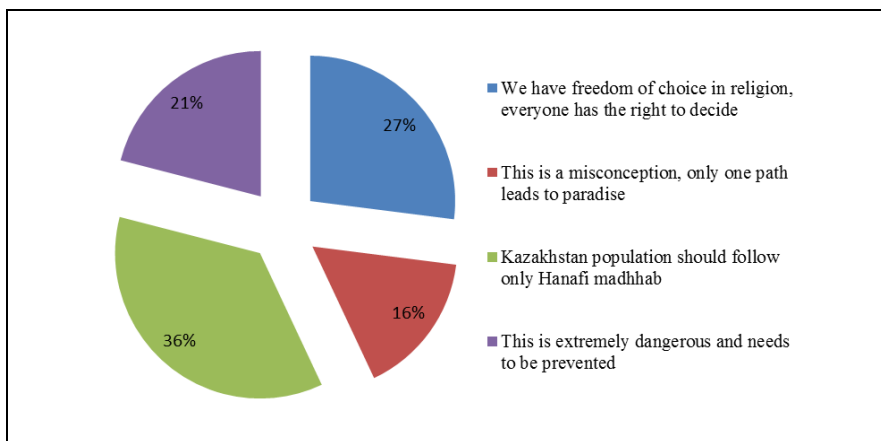
**5.3. ‘Which factor, in your opinion, directly influences the stability of religious situation in Kazakhstan?’**

It is easy to see the difference in opinions of the respondents (Figure 3). Many of them refer to legislation regulations and inter-religious tolerance that show their support of public policy. However, many rated religious situation as unstable, thus revealing that the problem of religion is relevant. Moreover, this figure indicates a negative image of destructive movements among the citizens.

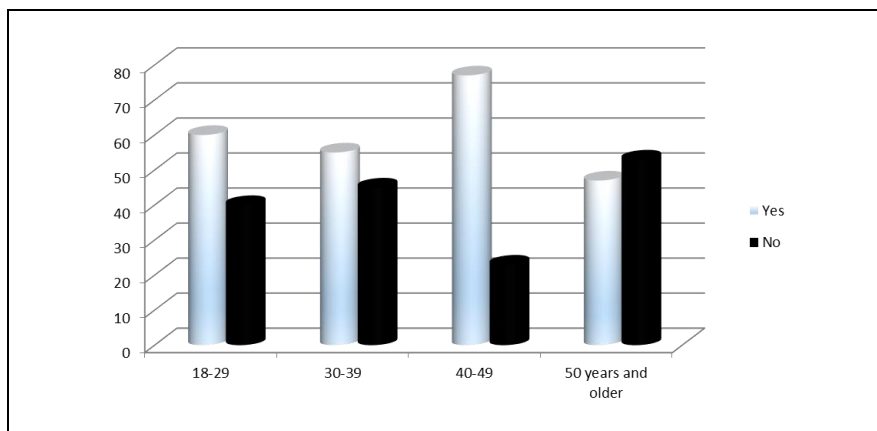




**Figure 3.** Factors directly influencing the stability of religious situation in Kazakhstan in %.



**Figure 4.** Diversities of ways of following the religion by Muslims in %.



**Figure 5.** Satisfaction with the present state of Islam in Kazakhstan.

#### **5.4. 'What is your opinion on the diversity of Islam in Kazakhstan?'**

The question was asked in order to find out the opinion on religious identity and spiritual unity among the respondents (Figure 4). Answering, they offered independent, tolerant, fundamentalist, patriotic, political opinions. The results turned out to be very different from the expectations: the neutral attitude of the respondents to the problem of religion was known in advance; they were not perceived as a well-informed religious group (for example, when selecting the information in determining the role of Islam in his or her personal life), but the majority of respondents indicated that they support Hanafi madhhab and highly estimated the freedom of religion. These results demonstrate that in the near future it will be possible to observe a new development of Hanafi madhhab among followers of Islam.

However, the number of people interested in Islam grows, and the risk of infiltration of pseudo-Islamic currents grows as well.

#### **5.5. 'Are you satisfied with the present state of Islam in Kazakhstan?'**

The responses indicate that answers depend on the age group (Figure 5). For instance, people who are older than 50 showed anxiety about the activity of religion and its presence in social spheres, whereas people aged 40-50 assessed the same situation in the opposite way.

### **6. Conclusions**

Modern Islamic movements in most cases have been created for liberation from foreign colonial powers in the Arab world, but at the same time they are characterized with the use of a special kind of religious teachings. Their main distinctive features are: (1) reinterpretation of religious texts according to a specific ideology, (2) contrasting of unfairness of state authority and social system to religious laws, and finally (3) call for revolution. All modern Islamic movements in Kazakh society place the national spiritual traditions in contrast to Islam and call to renounce traditional ways in order to come to a 'pure Islam'. The danger of this is in renouncing the historical roots, the loss of connection with the past, the loss of sense of patriotism and formation of marginalized groups. All these threaten the state integrity. The events that have taken place in the western part of the country, as well as the departure of several hundreds of our citizens to Syria to participate in war there prove it.

The special importance of Islam in Kazakhstan is revealed through history, cultural and traditional values, also by its place in different socio-political spheres for centuries.

The limited space of the current research makes it impossible to present the complete report of the contribution of Islam for cultural or political groups in the society, as well as in spiritual formation and development of Kazakh civilization. Still it is worth mentioning that Islam entered Kazakh lands in the

8<sup>th</sup> century and still exists there in the form of the Sunni Hanafi madhhab, with Maturidi aqidah, and reverence to Khawaja Ahmad Yassawi's teachings.

Even in times of atheist ideology, religion and traditions intertwined, and spiritual culture merged with everyday life and superstitions. During the Soviet period, Islam retained among the population due to traditions and customs. Kazakhstan has become a territory of different religious movements' activity: Salafists or Wahhabists, Tabligi Jama'ah, Hizb-ut-Tahrir. Some of them have political goals, while others focus on economic benefits.

The danger of dissemination of so-called 'true Islam' by new Islamic movements among the Kazakhstani people is in religious illiteracy of the majority of the population. People are not aware of the type of Islam that has been practiced on this territory for centuries. That is why they think that the 'revival' of faith is coming back to Islam of the prophet Muhammad time. The preachers of the mentioned radical religious organizations think that the attention and interest of people could be caught by showing the difference between local ('not pure') Islam and the Islam of the period of the prophet Muhammad. So people could be easily pushed towards a political goal of Islamic state formation. Such organizations and unions among Kazakhstan citizens make them be isolated from the society and create social danger because of opposition to the government.

Multi-religious character of our society, quantitative growth of different religious movements, and low religious literacy of the population require Religious Studies to be taught at different levels of educational system. This will help to respond to urgent social needs. Integration of Religious Studies into the state educational system at all its levels will enable young people to learn and understand the role and place of various world religions, national human civilization and national culture, the influence of religion on public life, structure and features of religious worldview, and function of religion in the contemporary world.

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