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# **RELIGIOUS RADICALISM AND GENDER IN MODERN KAZAKHSTAN FROM AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE**

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## **Abstract**

Determining the impact of religious knowledge of religious women on gender relations contemporary Kazakh society and thereby studying the religious aspects of gender relations formed in the society, is an urgent issue. Since the independence of the Kazakhstan number of citizens, especially women, who follow a religious lifestyle and consider religious values as an integral attribute of their life is growing. A legitimate question arises as to what place religious women occupy in the social structure of secular society and how they can influence socio-economic, religious and cultural processes. The article analyzes gender relations in Kazakh society, women's religiosity, as well as the current conditions of women who went to the battlefield in Syria and Iraq under the guidance of radical religious ideology and returned to the country with humanitarian operations 'Zhusan', 'Rusafa'. The threat of foreign terrorist-linked organizations and strategies for adaptation, rehabilitation, reintegration and deradicalization and of those connected with them to the secular society, preservation of human rights and its gender manifestations are described. This article will also interpret the results of various interviews and surveys, psychological and theological findings conducted in order to determine the reasons for the religious radicalism of women in Kazakh society.

*Keywords:* Gender, religion, women's radicalization, repatriation, rehabilitation

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## **1. Introduction**

One of the most important issues in modern Kazakh society is determining the impact of religious knowledge of religious women on gender relations, thereby studying the religious aspects of gender relations in society.

According to a survey conducted by the Ministry of Information and Social Development of Kazakhstan on the religious situation in Kazakhstan in 2020, 61.3% of Kazakhstanis follow Sunni Islam [2 out of 3 Kazakhstanis consider themselves religious people. at the same time, 2 out of 5 believers limit themselves to holidays and observing some formalities, Ranking.kz., April 16, 2021, available online at <https://ranking.kz/reviews/other/2-iz-3-kazahstancev->

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prichislyayut-sebya-k-veruyushim-lyudyam-pri-etom-sredi-veruyushih-2-iz-5-og-ranichivayutsya-lish-prazdnikami-i-soblyudeniem-nekotoryh-formalnostej.htm].

However, according to Professor A. Nysanbayev, this figure could be overstated as only about 12-13% of Kazakhs fully adhere to religious norms. The majority of believers are nominal, because they do not go to any religious institutions and do not participate in the activities of religious associations, and do not follow the laws of religious life [1, p. 41]. The religiosity of Kazakhstanis can be described as diffuse and superficial, not requiring much knowledge or performance of religious rites.

In the post-independence years, Kazakhstan has seen an increase in the number of citizens, including women, who follow a religious lifestyle and consider religious values as an integral attribute of their identity. A legitimate question arises as to the role of religious women in the social structure of secular society and how they can influence the socio-economic, religious, and cultural spheres. Unfortunately, neo-fundamentalist religious organizations in the country recognize the full dependence of women on their husbands as a Muslim value and seek to limit women's constitutional rights and freedoms as much as possible. In this regard, there is a need to determine the role of women in religion and the principles on which their social relations with men are based. It is also important to analyze the image of women in the traditional religious concept and the relationship with society of such extreme radical religious positions and attitudes. This is because the prevalence of gender statuses and roles, which are not based on traditional religions, has led to religious marginalization. Currently, there is a tendency for potential isolation and indifference among neo-fundamentalist Muslim women.

At the same time, there are many shortcomings in the realization of the potential of women with traditional religious views. Their exclusion from public life and their inability to realize their potential can lead to great personal and social difficulties. Research on women's religiosity in Kazakhstan in the post-independence years G. Dossanova's doctoral dissertation 'Women's religion and new Muslim practices in Kazakhstan' [2], a study of the Kazakhstan Institute for Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities are important research works [3]. However, it can be said that there is no specific research on gender relations in Kazakhstan from the Islamic point of view.

Over the past decade, the ideas of religious fanaticism and radicalism have become widespread in society. At the same time, the number of people convicted of extremist views and actions based on radical religious ideology and slogans calling for war has increased significantly. Radicalization can lead religious person to violence. This undermines the stability and rapid development of society and security and peace. Extremism is dangerous for society. No society is immune to extremism. The aggressive actions of religious fanatics create contradictions in society and promote xenophobia, Islamophobia and other extremist views and actions in response. Today's terrorism operates under the guise of ideology and religion, and terrorist groups often try to hide their crimes within the framework of religious knowledge and values. Hamid al-Saeed, a professor at the University of Manchester, says that in order to defeat

the terrorists, we must first defeat their ideology, because the struggle for ideas is a real ‘strategic battle’ for them. Radicalization comes from the Latin word ‘radix’ (foundation, origin), which means the rapid process of radicalism and the adoption of the ideology of extremism. The concept of radicalization also includes the process that takes place through the use of radical means that violate the normative framework of society [4, p. 21]. After the first terrorist attacks in Kazakhstan in 2011, deradicalization efforts began. In the field of deradicalization in Kazakhstan there are ‘Advice’ in Aktobe, ‘Propaganda’ in Kokshetau, ‘Nurly Bilim’ in Karaganda, ‘Shapagat’ in Atyrau, ‘Akniyet’ in Nursultan, as well as ‘Counseling and Rehabilitation’ centers opened by the Department of Religious Affairs, and ‘Academy of Action Against Religious Extremism’ at the Egyptian University of Islamic Culture Nur-Mubarak.

Today, foreign terrorist fighters (ISIS) are a security problem for many countries and regions of the world, including five Central Asian countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Especially in March 2019, after the fall of the last bastion of the Islamic State (IS) in Syria (Baghuz), there was a growing concern about the possible threats that foreign fighters (citizens of Central Asia) who have completed their active experience in Syria may leave the battlefield and be sent to their home countries or third countries as jihadists [5, p. 125].

The results of Operation ‘Zhusan’ in the country make it necessary to study the socio-psychological portrait of women who have been driven by radical religious ideology. Studying the formation of religiosity and religious socialization of women who returned from the battlefield in Syria, carrying out rehabilitation work with them allows for an understanding of theological, socio-psychological and cultural aspects of religiosity.

## **2. Research methodology**

In order to study the gender aspects of religious radicalism in Kazakh society, we must first study, and the impact of the reception of the returnees from the war field in the Kazakh society. Scientific conclusions are considered in two categories. Short-term concerns include – repatriation and prosecution, while long-term consideration include – planned rehabilitation and reintegration. Based on this direction, we will conduct our research and make scientific conclusions. Biographical analysis method - The application of the biographical analysis method based on the life histories of returnees enables a deeper exploration of their social adaptation processes, psychological experiences, and reintegration mechanisms. Through this method, the life experiences and personal narratives of returnees undergo structured analysis, revealing the challenges and opportunities within the processes of repatriation, rehabilitation, and integration. Furthermore, biographical analysis is aimed at examining the subjective perspectives of returnees, their individual decisions, and the socio-cultural factors that have shaped them. The biographical method is a widely used research approach in the social sciences. Several scholars have contributed to its development, among whom the most significant are: William I. Thomas (1863-

1947) and Florian Znaniecki (1882-1958) in their work 'The Polish Peasant in Europe and America' [6]. Content analysis of policy documents and rehabilitation program reports. Data collection focuses on short-term concerns (repatriation and prosecution) and long-term concerns (rehabilitation and reintegration).

### **3. The Image of Women in Religious Radicalism in Kazakhstan**

The US State Department's annual report on international terrorism states that the civil war in Syria has become one of the factors contributing to the escalation of terrorist activities. Continuous conflicts in the Middle East have led to the radicalization of citizens of other countries. According to the American analytical company Soufan Group, in 2016, more than 30,000 people joined ISIS and other radical groups in Syria and Iraq. The self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) terrorist organization in Syria has been described as a religious insurgent pseudo-state. It was a terrorist organization that gained an unprecedented global audience through its propaganda. At its peak in 2014, it was estimated that the organization controlled 11 million people in an area of 100,000 km<sup>2</sup>. During this period, at least 4300 terrorist acts were committed in 29 countries around the world [*ISIS goes global: 143 attacks in 29 countries have killed 2,043*, CNN, February 12, 2018, available online at <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/12/17/world/mapping-isis-attacks-around-the-world/index.html>]. According to a comprehensive analysis of the international security consulting company The Soufan Group, 31,000 citizens from at least 81 countries visited Syria and Iraq in 2014, and a quarter of them were women and minors [*31,000 citizens from at least 81 countries visited Syria and Iraq in 2014*, The Soufan Group, 17 June, 2015, available online at <https://www.soufangroup.com>].

The start of the Syrian civil war in 2011 triggered a wave of Kazakh nationals traveling with family members to the Middle East to join armed militias and designated terrorist groups fighting against the Syrian government. The largest number of citizens of Kazakhstan went to the conflict zones in 2013-2015, which stopped in 2017 as a result of preventive measures taken by the government. During the years that followed, civilians went on a 'family jihad' with their entire families, including women and minor children in 2013, Western media reported that '150 Kazakhstani' families had joined the ISIS terrorist organization. Although the information is not accurate, it became known that in 2019, as a result of the operation 'Zhusan' in Kazakhstan, several radicalized men went to the conflict zones with their families.

Thousands of women and children have been arbitrarily detained in camps in northeastern Syria and Iraq since the Islamic State lost territory. According to UN experts, they "have been subjected to violence, exploitation, and cruelty in the absence of effective remedies, in situations that may amount to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment under international law" [United nations, *UN report documents "alarming" deterioration in human rights in eastern Ukraine*, May 14, 2014, available online at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2014/05/un-report-documents-alarming>

-deterioration-human-rights-eastern-ukraine]. Under international law, states are obligated to protect the rights of their citizens regardless of where they are or whether they have committed a crime. With this in mind, despite UN calls to facilitate repatriation from the camps, there has been constant public debate in a number of European countries. These debates focus on political, legal and ethical arguments, security issues, humanitarian issues, reputational risks, radicalization and more. From the countries of Central Asia, only Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan brought their citizens to their countries. Each state used its own practices. While Kazakhstan focused on the deradicalization of repatriates, Tajikistan focused on pragmatic state protectionism, and Uzbekistan used the practice of social reintegration [7]. Women who returned from the battlefields in Syria and Iraq proved that they left as victims, that is, they left at the initiative of their husbands, not of their own free will. Therefore, they were only classified as observers and were not held accountable [*Central Asia brings foreign fighters' families home, but what next?* Open Democracy free thinking for the world, 2019, available online at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/returnees-central-asia/>]. Such a gender dynamic leads to the assumption that only men make decisions in a patriarchal society.

Kazakhstan created a special operation to repatriate its citizens who went to war in Syria and Iraq, and developed rehabilitation and reintegration programs for them. Rehabilitation and reintegration programs are aimed at people who have experienced violence (terrorist offenders) and sometimes their families, as well as people who have not been convicted but may provide some level of support. Violent extremism, including those returning from territory held by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Programs can be implemented in prisons, non-custodial settings, communities or as part of probation services. Programs can offer educational and vocational training, counseling, employment opportunities, and ideological re-education. In the context of public health, this is known as 'tertiary prevention' [8, p. 9]. The rehabilitation and reintegration program of Kazakhstan was called humanitarian operation 'Zhusan'. Rehabilitation and reintegration works include five levels (personal, family, educational, relational, social) and include five main goals: 1) personal mental health and well-being; 2) assistance in family support; 3) success in education; 4) support for public support; 5) improvement of structural conditions and maintenance of public safety.

#### **4. Humanitarian operation 'Zhusan'**

The special operation to bring Kazakh citizens from Syria was called 'Zhusan'. In traditional literature, the word 'Zhusan' (wormwood) is used in the sense of nostalgia for a distant homeland. Operation 'Zhusan' began in May-June 2018. This special operation was carried out by the National Security Committee on the initiative of the First President Nursultan Nazarbayev. It was an important and courageous act to return the citizens who fled to the conflict zones under the guise of religion and to take responsibility for them at the state level. 425 departments and 10 government agencies took part in the special

operation. The operation has not been easy at the international level. One of the first steps was to identify camps with Kazakh nationals in northeastern Syria, through talks with allies and leaders of Kurdish camps that held detainees who were members of the ISIS terrorist organization. There were three temporary concentration camps (Al-Khol, al-Roj, Ain-Issa), two prisons (Malikkiya, Gerevana) and additional smaller prisons. It was a great task to gather citizens of Kazakhstan from thousands of prisoners in dangerous areas. Citizens of Kazakhstan, who fled to the Middle East with their families to live under Sharia law, had no plans to return, but the deteriorating situation in the ISIS-controlled military territory forced them to go to Kurdish camps and join their relatives to seek help from the state. The ‘Zhusan’ operation lasted for several years. As a result of complex and protracted international agreements, it was decided in October 2018 that the first humanitarian operation would be launched to repatriate women and children who had requested state assistance. In December, 600 Kazakh citizens returned to their country. In recent years, more than half of those who left Kazakhstan for the war were women and children. According to the official data of the National Security Committee of Kazakhstan, from 2015 to 2017, 255 Kazakh citizens joined international terrorist organizations [*Seven Kazakhstani women and 16 children are in Syria: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan is working on their return*, New Times, September 13, 2018, available online at <https://newtimes.kz/obshchestvo/77749-sem-kazakhstanskikh-zhenshchin-i-16-detej-nakhodyatsya-v-sirii-mid-rk-rabota-et-nad-ikh-vozvrashcheniem>]. As indicated in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Kazakh citizens joined international terrorist organizations.

<b>Gone to war area</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>
Women	83	26	
Children	64	35	
<b>Total</b>	<b>186</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>Not registered</b>
<b>Returned</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>
Women	6	2	15
Children	13	4	26
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>41</b>

Before the ‘Zhusan’ humanitarian operation, Kazakhs who were disillusioned with the Khalifat voluntarily returned to the country. From 2016 to 2018, 39 families returned, including 91 children. They also received social and humanitarian assistance. Out of the 40 parents who returned from the war, 13 were employed [*More than 90 children have returned from hot spots to Kazakhstan over the past 2 years*, Tengri News December 20, 2018, available online at [https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan\\_news/90-detej-vernulis-goryachih-tochek-kazahstan-poslednie-2-359923/](https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/90-detej-vernulis-goryachih-tochek-kazahstan-poslednie-2-359923/)].

Kazakhstan was one of the first countries to conduct a repatriation operation. It consisted of three main and two additional stages. In addition to Operation ‘Zhusan’, Operation ‘Rusafa’ was launched to bring the children of Kazakh nationals who were in the ISIS terrorist organization in Iraqi prisons. As

a result, 595 Kazakh citizens returned to their country from Syria through the ‘Zhusan’ operation, and 18 women and children through the ‘Rusafa’ operation. As indicated in Table 2.

**Table 2.** The total number of citizens who returned from Syria through Operation ‘Zhusan’:

Category and term	Men	Women	Children
‘Zhusan’ 1 (06.01.2019)	6	11	30
‘Zhusan’ 2 (7-9.05.2019)	16	59	156
‘Zhusan’ 3 (28-31.05.2019)	8	67	171
‘Zhusan’ 4	3	19	49
‘Rusafa’ from Iraq (27.11.2019)	-	4	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>420</b>
		<b>613</b>	

The SDF Kurdish group’s press center said on its official website that the SDF had handed over to Kazakhs government 5 Kazakh terrorists, 11 women and 30 children detained by members of the northeastern ISIS terrorist organization with the participation of commanders of democratic self-government in Syria [9, p. 135].

Among those who returned to the country through the humanitarian operation Jusan, 49 people (33 men, 16 women) were arrested and are serving their sentences in criminal cases under investigation for involvement in terrorist activities and Terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda, Taliban, and the Islamic State have allowed women to participate in socially important operations in the media. They have been active in raising funds for the Islamic State and campaigning for women. Women also worked as teachers, doctors, and nurses. In the wars in Syria and Iraq, women sometimes acted as ‘mujahideen’.

On January 9, 2019, the press service of Akorda issued a statement by President Nursultan Nazarbayev on the completion of the humanitarian operation to evacuate Kazakh citizens from Syria.

“As a result of a humanitarian operation carried out by law enforcement agencies and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on my behalf on January 6 this year, 47 of our citizens, including 30 children, were returned from Syria to our country. They were deceived and imprisoned by terrorists (the international terrorist organization ILIM, which is banned in Kazakhstan). Upon arrival in Kazakhstan, all state assistance was provided to women and children. There is no limit to the joy of these innocent people in such a difficult situation. They will remain the adaptation center for a month and receive the necessary medical care. The work which was done will help prevent such incidents.” [Statement by the Head of State on the Completion of the Humanitarian Measure to Evacuate Kazakh Citizens from Syria, Akorda, January 9, 2019 available online at [https://www.akorda.kz/kz/events/akorda\\_news/akorda\\_other\\_events/memleket-basshysynyn-kazakstan-azamattaryn-siriyadan-evakuaciyalau-zhonindegigumanitarlyk-sharanyn-ayaktaluyna-bailanysty-malimdemesi](https://www.akorda.kz/kz/events/akorda_news/akorda_other_events/memleket-basshysynyn-kazakstan-azamattaryn-siriyadan-evakuaciyalau-zhonindegigumanitarlyk-sharanyn-ayaktaluyna-bailanysty-malimdemesi)].

Thus, all Kazakh citizens in temporary camps in the north-eastern part of Syria have returned to their country.

The Deputy Chairman of the National Security Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan, N. Bilisbekov, announced that in February 2020, all stages of the special operation to remove Kazakhstanis from areas of terrorist activity were completed [*The National Security Committee announced the completion of all stages of the Operation Zhusan*, Agency Kazinform, February 6, 2020, available online at [https://www.inform.kz/ru/v-knb-ob-yavili-o-zavershenii-vseh-etapov-operacii-zhusan\\_a3611689](https://www.inform.kz/ru/v-knb-ob-yavili-o-zavershenii-vseh-etapov-operacii-zhusan_a3611689)].

After the operation of the ‘Zhusan’, the prevailing attitude in Kazakh society toward those who returned from the battlefield was divided. Some said it was dangerous to bring them back because they could poison others with their radical views. Others argued that minors had no choice but to return. However, the majority of society was in favor of Kazakhstan returning its citizens the fact that Kazakhstan brought its citizens, including women and children, from the battlefield.

When we asked theologian Asylbek Snadin are they who returned from war territory due to the significance of the wormwood operation could re-integrate into the society which they once abandoned he said: “No one delusion knowing about this! Another important point is that the vast majority of those who returned are children and women. And if you look at the nature of the movement, which is devoted to ‘jihadist romance’ in the name of destructive Islam, you will see that the role of women is completely absent and irrelevant. In other words, these women who went to Syria only followed the instructions of their husbands.” [*Operation Wormwood: Is it possible to change the religious views of those returning from Syria?*, The Qazaq Times, May 30, 2019, available online at <https://qazaqtimes.com/article/62916>].

In order to prevent various viral diseases, those who returned from Syria were placed under a one-month quarantine in rehabilitation centers near the city of Aktau in order to prevent various viral diseases. In addition to medical workers, psychologists, theologians, and social workers of the Mangistau region also worked in the rehabilitation centers.

The people who returned feared that they would be imprisoned as soon as they arrived in the country. Theologians and psychologists talked to them and said that there was no reason to be afraid. As part of Operation ‘Zhusan’, we returned only women and children to the country. They are citizens of Kazakhstan. “People have forgiven you. The President has ordered not to punish you. We want you to return to normal life. Yes, you went to war in Syria. But no one will blame you for this.” [*Operation Zhusan: 90 percent of those who returned from Syria adopted national values*, Dala News, July 25, 2021, available online at <https://dalanews.kz/kz/article/jusan-operasyyasi-syryyadan-oralgandardin-90-payizi-ultti-qundiliqtardi-qabildagan.html>].

From various surveys and interviews with those who returned to the country during the special operation, admitted that they understood their mistakes and went in the wrong direction [Shapagat Atyrau Podcast, Syrian cold, YouTube, 2022, accessed online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?>

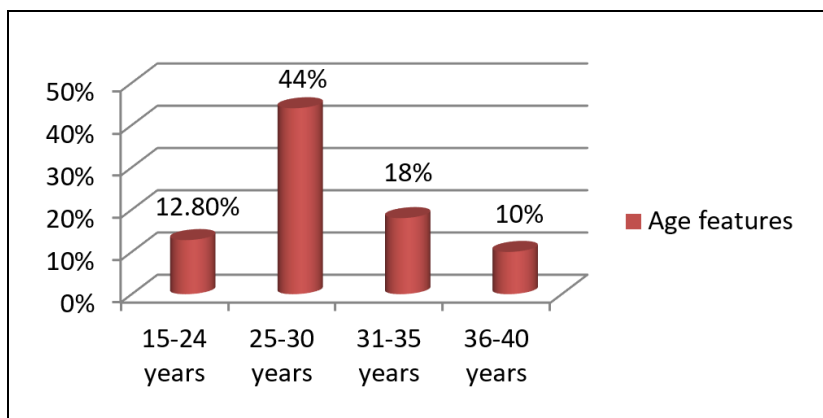
v=vYwNKswHFKY]. Also made short films to prevent such radicalization. The films show the difficult fate and regrets of women who returned from the battlefield from Syria [Shapagat Atyrau Film, Keruana, YouTube, 2023, accessed online at <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=tGSFd1Kfbas>]. Today, the vast majority of returnees have turned their backs to radical Islam and returned to normal life. However, it is difficult to say that everything has improved. Vice Minister of Information and Social Development M. Azilkhanov said at the IX Forum of Religious Scholars of Kazakhstan that those who returned to the country with Operation Wormwood still adhere to radical ideology, but their number is small and they have no extremist intentions. To date, more than 7,000 specialists have been involved in the fight against negative religious movements, and the results are encouraging.

## **5. Analysis of socio-demographic indicators of those who returned from Syria with the operation ‘Zhusan’**

At the end of the main mission of Operation ‘Zhusan’, the KNB (Committee for National Security) conducted various surveys and interviews for 2-3 days before returning to the new life to find out why they left their peaceful country for the battlefield in the Middle East. The interview was conducted with 125 women. The goals of the interview were to identify socio-demographic indicators, regional differences, reasons for conversion and reasons for leaving for Syria, return to Kazakhstan and future plans.

### **5.1. Age features**

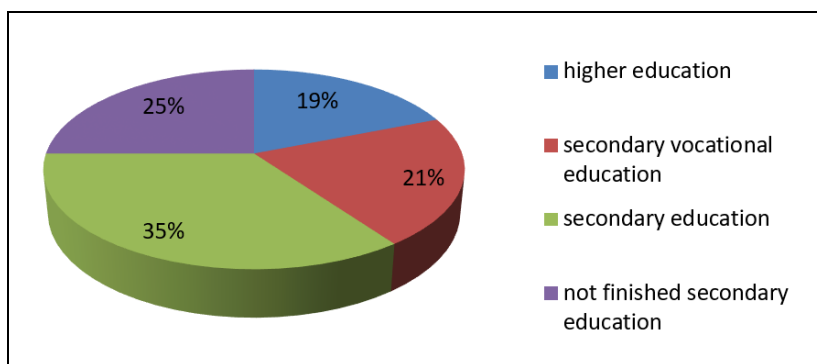
60% of women are between the ages of 25-35. The youngest is a 15-year-old woman who was taken to Syria by her mother at the age of 8 and married at the age of 13. As indicated in Figure 1. Now, the average age is 32. The average age of women leaving for Syria was under 25.



**Figure 1.** Age features

## 5.2. Level of education

More than half of the returnees have limited secondary education. For example, 8-year-old girl who left with her mother finished only 2nd grade, and another only finished 5th grade. However, 40% of returnees have secondary school diplomas, 21% have completed secondary vocational education and 19% have completed higher education. 25% did not complete secondary education. As indicated in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Level of education

## 5.3. Ethnicity

90% of those who left for Syria are ethnic Kazakhs. The remaining 10% are Russians, Uighurs, Kyrgyz, Dungans, Talysh, Azerbaijanis, Germans and Tatars. 78% of them are Kazakh language speakers and 22% are Russian language speakers.

## 5.4. Family model

The growing marital status of those who fled to Syria is closely linked to their departure for the battlefield. This is because people who have not parental care in childhood are easily seduced. 39% of those who left the war came from single-parent families, some of whose parents died or divorced. According to psychologists, people from single-parent families, have a poor relationships with their parents, who are socially isolated, or lack artistic communication are prone violent antisocial personalities. Under certain conditions, people with such a system of psychological thinking can easily become a tool of terrorist organizations [10].

## 5.5. Reasons for converting to religion

According to the survey, 41% of women who decided to follow a religious lifestyle voluntarily due to personal stress, difficulties and other factors. According to the survey, they want to find a solution to their problems by converting to religion. The results of a sociological study conducted by the

Kazakhstan Institute for Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities on women of different faiths show that women's personal and family problems, as well as financial difficulties, are the main reasons for their conversion [80% of Kazakh believers have thought about giving up religion - unique study, Karavan, December 11, 2018, available online at <https://www.caravan.kz/articles/80-procentov-veruyushhikh-kazakhstanok-zadumyvalis-ob-otkaze-ot-religii-unikalnoe-issledovanie-502523/>].

36% of those who returned from Syria through Operation 'Zhusan' converted to religion due to a religious family or close relatives, 27% began praying after marriage, and 37% became religious as teenagers. Newly converted women listened to radical religious preachers. According to the preachers of radical direction, jihad was used for women in the sense of 'jihad - the struggle against lust, deportation', and for men - in the sense of 'jihad - war with infidels'. It is also generally understood as 'jihad - a holy war in the way of God' [9, p. 177].

Due to such religious beliefs repatriates moved from secular Kazakhstan to Syria in the hope of establishing an Islamic caliphate. Despite the difficulties on the battlefield, there were those who expressed their remorse for moving there 'in accordance with Sharia law'. Knowing that the decision was made by a man in the family, 72% of those who went to the battlefield went following the instructions of their husbands, 14% with relatives, and the remaining 14% went on their own. Regarding the situation in Syria, all the women said that the war was for power, territory, property and money. During the conversation, returners said: "... There was a lot of lawlessness, death, rudeness, excess ... If it was a true Islamic khalifat, God would not allow small children to suffer ... It has become a battlefield, not an Islamic land..." [9, p. 135]. Through the opinions of women who returned from the battlefield, the difficult situation of Kazakh families is clear. During the interview, all women consciously said that they wanted to return to Kazakhstan. However, while some immediately understood the illusion of the establishment of the Islamic Khalifat, others took years to understand. At the end of the conversation, they thanked all the people and all of Kazakhstan, who forgave them and returned them to their homeland, who did not forget about their citizens on the battlefield. Now their goal is to educate and bring up their children so that they will be literate and will not commit any crimes. Thus, the humanitarian operation 'Zhusan' carried out in the country has yielded its results. They realized that a peaceful life was more valuable than anything else. Through Operation 'Zhusan', Kazakhstan has proved in practice that the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Part 1, Article 1: "... the most precious treasure is the person and human life, rights and freedoms." According to the results of all stages of the special humanitarian operation 'Zhusan', a total of 595 Kazakhstanis returned home. 33 men, 156 women and 406 children were delivered to the country. Today, as a result of their theological and psychological work, 181 out of 189 women have renounced their radical views (Committee on Religious Affairs RK 2020).

74% of repatriated women lived on the battlefield for more than 5 years (2014-2019). That is, they witnessed the main stages of the formation of the

Islamic Khalifat. The influence of these factors is still unknown, and it will be shown only be understood in the future. According to the director of the Center for Analysis and Development of Interfaith Relations G.M.Razdykova, repatriates did not participate in the political crisis that took place in the country in January 2022 [*Rehabilitation & Reintegration of Family Members of Foreign Terrorist Fighters: The Roles of Cities and Other Local Actors*, January 24, 2022, available online at <https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/en/webinar-rehabilitation-reintegration-of-family-members-of-foreign-terrorist-fighters-the-roles-of-cities-and-other-local-actors/>].

## **6. Women's Deradicalization Processes After Returning from Areas of Terrorist Activity**

Deradicalization is the process of changing the belief system, abandoning the ideology of extremism and accepting the common values characteristic of society. It is a psychological process that helps a person avoid extremist ideology and reduces the risk of committing terrorist acts. Dr. Hamid al-Said, a professor at the University of Manchester, insists that in order for deradicalization to have positive results, there must be certain favorable conditions at any level of society. The main components of the deradicalization program include communicative activities, conversations, religious conversations, theological debates that provide the right direction, dialogues discussing the problems that caused the aggressive behavior, correctional work by psychologists and recommendations, and characteristics of psychiatrists, that is, deradicalization is a mutual battle of ideas.

More than three years have passed since the 'Zhusan' operation, which returned the women who went to Syria under the influence of radical ideology. In the direction of deradicalization women with the who returned, the Committee for Religious Affairs of the Ministry of Information and Social Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan organizes and conducts activities for the prevention and rehabilitation of religious extremism at the national level. Since Kazakhstan is a secular state, it teaches its citizens the values of secularism and promotes traditional religious ideology. The centers of committees for religious affairs at the regional and city levels conduct many seminars and training sessions on deradicalization.

Chairman of the Committee for Religious Affairs E. Nukejanov said in an interview: "Rehabilitation work is underway. In order to direct the religious faith and beliefs of a person in the right direction, it is necessary to go through a difficult stage, consisting of several stages. 90% of the women who returned to the country as part of Operation 'Zhusan' in four phases have now completed full rehabilitation. According to him, together with rehabilitation centers, psychological and rehabilitation work is being carried out." [*'Zhusan' and 'Rusafa': about the current situation of citizens returning from Syria and Iraq*, April 1, 2021, available online at <http://religions-congress.org/kz/news/novosti/945>].

According to the deputy head of information and analysis center 'Ansar', theologian Tolegen Taldybaev, the current situation of those who returned to the country after the 'Zhusan' operation is stable. Medical, psychological, theological and ideological work was carried out for the citizens and children were documented which were lost. Children were placed in schools and kindergartens. Some of the children have remarried and some of them are employed.

State social assistance is provided in order to adapt and support the citizens who returned to the country through 'Zhusan' operation. For example, the state organizes holiday events, take them to places of rest, and celebrates Ramadan (fasting month), aid, giving presents etc. Also, depending on the place of residence, the city and regional departments of religious affairs hold meetings and seminars with qualified theologians and psychologists, and continue rehabilitation work. Some of these include Professor of the Academy of Law Enforcement, well-known psychologist L.S. Shakimova, religious scholar A. Sabdin, and representatives of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan 'Ways of communicating with people prone to conflict', 'Consequences of social networks', 'In child psychology used psychological methods', 'The meaning of the Islamic religion in the coming to humanity and artistic character', 'Resolving difficult situations in relationships' [*Expert talks about rehabilitation of women and children who returned from Syria*, Almaty, 2022, available online at <https://www.zakon.kz/stati/6009371-dagestanskii-liubovnik-okazalsia-dlia-kazashek-lovushkoi-terroristov-ekspert.html>]. Organized by the center against religious extremism, rehabilitation courses with qualified theologians and psychologists, Professor Muhammad al-Shahkhat Abdulhamid Muhammad al-Jindi 'Rights, place and status of women in Islam', PhD, associate professor, Islamic scholar S.A. Adilbaeva 'Status of women in Islam', 'A woman's beauty and artistic character', T. Nusiphan 'The personality of a Muslim woman in a secular society', PhD doctor, psychologist A. Tolegenova 'Psychological peace of a woman in Islam', etc. seminars were held on the topics [*A course for "Zhusan" operation and returnees was held at Nur-Mubarak University*, Nur-Mubarak, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CVVR93Vj97Q/?igsh=bjB3czM4OW1rbXk4>].

From a regional point of view, 77% of women from the radically destructive group of Kazakhstan who went to jihad are residents of the territory of western Kazakhstan. Most of those who returned to the country are concentrated in the West Kazakhstan region (31 people), Atyrau (24 people), Karaganda (23 people). They went to Syria through third countries such as Turkey, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates. At present, the number has stopped growing, and the goal of the committee is to reduce their number by carrying out rehabilitation work with them and providing theological and psychological assistance.

As a result of the de-radicalization work, the repatriates, due to the shallowness of their religious education, understood the term 'jihad' only in the direct meaning of 'war' and migrated to the battlefields in Syria and Iraq. The word 'Jihad' in Arabic means to strive, struggle to achieve a certain result, goal

or to do something. Although the word ‘jihad’ is mentioned in 35 places in the Qur’an, only four places have the meaning of direct war. In the Qur’an, the concept of war is expressed by the terms ‘harb’, ‘muharabah’, ‘magraka’, and ‘qital’ [*What is the Zhihad?*, Almaty, 2011, available online at <https://static.islam.kz/uploads/books/jihad/files/assets/basic-html/page-1.htm>].

In addition to seminars and training sessions, methodological textbooks are being published with the goal of deradicalization. The methodological tool ‘Theological narratives of deradicalization’ by A.K. Sabdin, director of the ‘Thought’ center for applied research of religions, with the support of the Department of Religious Affairs of Almaty, was published in 2020, [11] and in 2021 the methodological tool ‘Implementation of psychological process of deradicalization with followers of destructive religious currents, including women returning from terrorist active areas’ prepared by authors L.S. Shakimova, A.S. Abdukeeva, and A.K. Sabdin and was published [12]. In 2022, on the order of the Department of Religious Affairs of Almaty the methodical tool ‘Regarding adaptation and rehabilitation of followers of destructive religious currents to traditional values’ was published, written by T.Nusipkhan, N.Stambakiyev, S.Shakizada, B.Ilesbekov, A.Temurbayev, and N.Smagulov. These books summarize good practices and lessons learned from initial efforts to rehabilitate and reintegrate children and women returning from Syria, address current challenges affecting their implementation, and identify potential opportunities for more inclusive partnerships and sustainable rehabilitation and reintegration outcomes.

During talks with high-ranking officials on October 7-8, 2019, USA State Department Counter-Terrorism Coordinator and Ambassador Nathan A. Sales discussed Kazakhstan’s fundamental work on the rehabilitation and reintegration of citizens who returned to the country from the regions of Iraq and Syria formerly known as the Islamic State (IS)” and appreciated the country’s constructive efforts to share its experience. During his visit to Kazakhstan, he visited the rehabilitation center in Karaganda city and shared his thoughts: “I saw that religious authorities, child psychologists, representatives of the Ministry of Education and Science and other government agencies are all working there”. “Today, the whole world should pay attention to what is happening in Kazakhstan, because the lessons learned here will be useful for the whole world.” [*US praises ‘groundbreaking’ Kazakh repatriation process of IS returnees*, Caravanserai, October 16, 2019, available online at [https://central.asia-news.com/en\\_GB/articles/cnmi\\_ca/features/2019/10/16/feature-01](https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2019/10/16/feature-01)]. After Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kosovo, France, and other countries have returned their citizens to their homelands. [*France Brings 10 Children of French Jihadists Home from Syria*, The New York Times online, June 22, 2020, available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/22/world/europe/france-isis-children-repatriated.html>].

Psychologists and theologians conducting rehabilitation work had to show in their reports what kind of danger a repatriate woman poses to society. Counselors, theologians, leaders of rehabilitation centers, to name a few, predict that these women remain at risk of radicalization. Due to financial and housing

problems, they were forced to return to their former social environment. Women who return are getting married, and if the husband is a radical Muslim, the risk of radicalization increases. Among the repatriates there are women who are convinced of the absolute truth of their views and women who believe that their life in Kazakhstan is temporary [13, p. 31].

Also, rehabilitation work should be focused on the inclusion of women in social processes so that they can find their place in society and imagine their outlook on life in a secular state in accordance with the post-secularity of Kazakh society. For example, in Kyrgyzstan, there are public associations where religious women meet for their interests, discuss personal and social issues, and provide religious education [14, p. 307].

## **7. Conclusion**

Gender and religion are closely related. Every year the number of religious women in the society of Kazakhstan is increasing. There are women with destructive religious views as well as those with traditional religious views. The Committee on Religious Affairs of the Ministry of Information and Community Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan, which regulates the field of religious services, works in the country. 9 boards serve in the committee [*Rehabilitation of followers of destructive religious movements*, 2020, available online at <https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/din/activities/925?lang=kk&parentId=141>]. Among them, the Department of Coordination of Information and Explanatory Works, Departments of Coordination of Rehabilitation Works identify citizens with a radical attitude in each region and carry out rehabilitation works with them. According to the studies of these institutions, young women under the age of 40 are often exposed to radical views. They obtain their religious knowledge from the Internet or from destructive preachers through their husbands, not from specific traditional religious institutions. As a result, they are isolated from society, refuse medical care and do not send their children to school. In 2017, About 100 women who refused medical help gave birth at home in Atyrau. In 2018, in the city of Aktobe, 72 female students refused to wear school uniforms and did not come to school, 22 of them did not pass to the next level. Due to their religious illiteracy, they understood themselves as victims of the secular society. The humanitarian operation ‘Zhusan’ carried out in our country is a reflection of the radical attitude of women in Kazakh society. Mia Bloom in her book ‘Bombshells: Women and Terror’ lists the five most important reasons for women to commit terrorism: revenge, ransom, kinship, respect and violence [15, p. 21]. He claims that the most important of these is kinship. If a woman is related to a jihadist, it is enough for her to confidently follow him. The adoption of a radical attitude by the women of Kazakhstan also happens through family ties. All the interviewed women went to Syria with their husbands with the dream of living in the caliphate. At present, it makes no sense to accuse them of blind faith, irresponsibility, and lack of critical thinking skills. We hope that their time away from their place of birth has brought them wisdom. There is the Kazakh proverb “Do not make orphan cry, do not make

widow wander” has not lost its relevance. By returning its citizens to their country Kazakhstan them to build a new life and return to their homeland. Today, the repatriates are grateful to the leadership of the country and the National Security Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan, which gave them the opportunity to live in peace, raise their children and correct their mistakes, and for the tolerance of their fellow citizens, who welcomed them warmly. They express gratitude for their new life [*Operation ‘Zhusan’ - gratitude for a new life*, 2021, available online at <https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/knb/press/article/details/42716?lang=ru>].

Kazakhstan is arguably the Central Asian country with the most political will for repatriation while being the most focused on rehabilitation thereafter. Despite concerns about the persistent radicalization of returnees, the repatriated, mostly children and women, are usually considered survivors of terror who are Kazakh citizens, and thus the responsibility of the Kazakh state.

Several years have passed since the completion of the ‘Jusan’ operation. However, the full social adaptation of the women repatriated to Kazakhstan remains a pressing issue. Their integration into society is not only connected to legal and economic aspects but is also closely linked to social, psychological, and cultural factors. International experience and research suggest that the successful reintegration of individuals returning from radical environments depends on five key factors [16, 17]:

- Psychological rehabilitation – complete disengagement from extremist ideology.
- Social support – restoring ties with family and society.
- Economic independence – access to education and employment opportunities.
- Effectiveness of state policy – rehabilitation programs and legislative support.
- Public acceptance – overcoming stigmatization and re-socialization.

As part of the ‘Jusan’ operation, Kazakhstan repatriated more than 600 of its citizens, including nearly 200 women. [*Operation "Zhusan": Why did Kazakhs end up in Syria*, 2021, available online at <https://masa.media/ru/site/operatsiya-zhusan-pochemu-kazakhstantsy-okazalis-v-sirii>]. The key stages of their adaptation include:

- Official rehabilitation programs – disengagement from radical ideology and improving religious literacy.
- Social and psychological assistance – psychotherapy, counselling, and the development of social skills.
- Economic support – vocational training and grants for small business development.

According to the Committee on Religious Affairs of Kazakhstan, most women repatriated through the ‘Jusan’ operation have adapted to society, however, full integration remains incomplete: More than half have found employment or started businesses. Some are continuing their education or participating in social projects. A portion remains isolated due to stigmatization, distrust, and the risk of returning to their previous environment [18]. In Kazakh

society, opinions on women repatriated through the ‘Jusan’ operation are divided:

1. They should be given a chance to re-socialize – supporting them as full-fledged citizens.

2. They pose a potential threat – concerns about a possible return to radical ideology. This creates a stigmatization problem, as public distrust can hinder employment and the ability to start a new life [19]. Countries such as Norway, Germany, and the UK have developed comprehensive programs for the adaptation of individuals returning from radical environments: These programs combine psychological support, education, employment, and measures to restore social connections [19]. While Kazakhstan has adopted a similar approach, long-term monitoring and integration mechanisms still require improvement. Although most women repatriated through the ‘Jusan’ operation have adapted to society, some still require systematic support. To ensure their full integration, the following measures are recommended: Provision of long-term psychological support – psychotherapy and psycho-social assistance should continue after rehabilitation. Strengthening employment and entrepreneurship programs – economic independence is a crucial factor in successful integration. Public awareness campaigns – comprehensive information efforts are needed to reduce stigmatization in society. Implementation of a long-term monitoring system – assessing the effectiveness of the adaptation process of repatriated women. The implementation of these measures will enhance Kazakhstan’s reintegration policy and facilitate the full inclusion of women repatriated through the ‘Jusan’ operation as active members of society.

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