
FORMATION OF ISLAMIC IDENTITY IN KAZAKHSTAN AND THE CENTRAL ASIAN REGION IN CONDITIONS OF RELIGIOUS REVIVAL

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Abstract

The present article study's Islamic identity in Kazakhstan and the Central Asian region, situating it within the broader context of independence and religious revival. A thorough examination of the factors and peculiarities that have contributed to the formation of Islamic identity in Kazakhstan reveals the predominant trends and potential forecasts of identification processes related to the search for the religious and spiritual origins of Kazakh society. This analysis also addresses critical issues such as religious radicalization, religiously motivated extremism, and intra-confessional division. The concept of Islamic identity is understood within the broader framework of religious, cultural, and national identities. From a scientific perspective, Islamic identity is a subject of interest due to its role in shaping worldview paradigms of Islamic consciousness. The comprehension of its significance in communication practices facilitates the recognition of its sociocultural importance. Discussions within the humanities concerning the principles and reasons that constitute Islamic identity demonstrate the ambiguity and complexity of the issue.

Keywords: Islam in Kazakhstan, Islam in Central Asia, Islamic Identity, Religious Revival, Ethno-Islamic Identity, Radicalizing Islamic Identity

1. Introduction

Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries are united not only by their close territorial location, but also by the common spiritual foundations of their historical and cultural development, with Islam at the center. The Islamic component is an integral part of the identification of Kazakhstanis. In this regard, the study of the religious situation in the Central Asian countries, especially the study of the Islamic issue and Islamic identity, contributes to the formation of a comprehensive knowledge of the role and factors of influence of

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the Islamic religion in the modern conditions of socio-political and socio-cultural transformations in the country and the region. Fundamental and applied research on the place and role of Islam in Kazakhstan in the context of the transformation of public life, the evolution of the political system and the impact of religion on its formation are due to the need of Kazakhstani society to implement safe strategies for integrating Islam into everyday practice. This is especially important given the modern demand of Kazakhstani society for spirituality and the presence of religion in the lives of citizens.

As is widely recognized, the scientific reconstruction of the phenomenon of religious identity in the contemporary world is a global trend in the context of postmodern, postcolonial, and post-secular processes. Identity markers are widely regarded as a foundational element in the examination of contemporary socio-political transformations in societies. A particularly salient issue is the examination of the factors that influence and the prospects of Islam in postnormal times, when conventional paradigms are being supplanted by entirely new ones that are oriented toward the interconnection of all bases of unity, principles. The discourses of post-normal times imply the multidimensionality of emerging problems and, consequently, the impossibility of simple solutions and interpretations if there is no holistic approach to the problems and their solutions. In contrast to the Western conception of normality, non-Western ideological and worldview positions exist and resonate strongly. Islam in modern realities is becoming increasingly multifaceted and dynamic. In the contemporary context, it is insufficient to approach the subject through the lens of a singular, 'correct' approach. In the context of post normal times, as conceptualized by Ziauddin Sardar, the development of effective solutions to multidimensional challenges necessitates the utilization of dialogues and consensus processes. These deliberative approaches, aimed at addressing multifaceted issues, involve the participation of representatives from diverse social groups, with a view to considering the interests of all stakeholders within the global and planetary ecosystem [1].

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, there has been a marked increase in the interest of foreign researchers and scientists in the countries of post-Soviet Central Asia. This phenomenon is also evident within the religious sphere [2 - 5]. Notably, the works of Shirin Akiner [6], Adeeb Khalid [7], and Johan Rasanayagam [8] have emerged, addressing significant questions concerning Islam and secularism in the region, the relationship between the state and society in religious matters, and the particularities, inconsistencies, and projected future scenarios of Islam's development. These works have already attained a high level of recognition among a broad community of scholars.

The advent of free access to religious practices, literature, and the work of missionaries from across the globe has precipitated a fundamental shift in the religious fabric of public consciousness, following many years of atheistic ideology. The term 'revival of Islam' or 'Re-Islamization', as employed by scientists, is a designation applied to the post-Soviet states. This term denotes an increase in the role of Islam and its involvement not only in private, but also in public life. The increasing prevalence of religious structures, external religious

paraphernalia, and quotidian Islamic ritual practices (namazkhana, azan, zhuma namaz, Islamic holidays, etc.) are becoming pervasive and present in the public life of Kazakhstan.

For the Republic of Kazakhstan, and indeed the entire region, the years of independence were characterized by dynamic processes of searching for identity, both states, national, cultural, and religious. One of the most extensively studied aspects of religious identity is that of Islamic identity, a phenomenon that is particularly salient in the context of the expanding role of Islam in the Central Asian region and throughout the world. In the context of public discourse, Islam is undergoing a process of reconstruction, being reimagined not only as a religious but also as an ethnic identity.

The formation of Islamic/Muslim identity and its transformation in Central Asian countries have been the subject of detailed analysis in the works of several scholars, including Olivier Roy [9], T. Jeremy Gunn [10], Scott Spehr and Nargis Kassanova [11], Galina M. Yemelianova [12], Ulan Bigozhin [13], Madina Bektenova [14]. The intricacies of the intersection of national, cultural, and spiritual tenets of Islamic identity, along with its variability contingent on historical region and incorporation within religious practice, have been extensively delineated in a sociological study undertaken by scientists Yaacov Ro'i and Alon Wainer [15]. The scientific study of inclusivity and exclusivity of religious, including Islamic identity, in Kazakhstan is approached through the lens of the dialogical paradigm of the Kazakh religious space, the correlation of tradition and modernity in religious consciousness, and the embeddedness of Islamic identity in the modern global multicultural reality [16].

In the context of Central Asia, researchers such as Chris Hann, Mathijs Pelkmans [17], Marlene Laruelle [18], Sergey Abashin [19], Maria Elisabeth Louw [20], David C. Lewis [21], and Anita Sengupt [22] have examined the subjects of Islamic presence, Islamic identity, and quotidian life from the vantage points of ethno-political and cultural discourses.

The Islamic identity of Kazakhstan is rooted in a historical process that has been shaped by civilizational, spiritual, and cultural continuity, both within the Turkic world and more broadly across the Islamic and Kazakh worlds.

In the context of the Russian scientific discourse about religious revival and the establishment of state-confessional relations, most of the research has been dedicated to the correlation of secularism and religiosity, state policy in the religious sphere, as well as historical and cultural features of Islamic and traditional values.

2. Materials and Methods

The intricacies and multidimensionality of the phenomenon of Islamic identity render the selection of a universal methodology for the elucidation of the semantic content and essence of this concept a challenging task.

Interdisciplinary methods, which, however, reveal the ontological and phenomenological foundations of identity, are quite numerous today. The demand for these texts can be attributed to the shifting religious paradigms and

evolving historical and political conditions that have characterized the contemporary era. During the Soviet period, the study of religious identity was approached exclusively through the lens of social and cultural anthropology. However, in the post-Soviet humanities, this field has evolved to become the subject of study for the entire complex of socio-humanitarian sciences.

This study is based on an interdisciplinary and qualitative methodology that combines a phenomenological approach, structural analysis, and comparative regional analysis. This synthesis allows for a comprehensive examination of Islamic identity as a socially constructed and historically conditioned category that is in constant dynamics depending on political, cultural, and institutional conditions.

Phenomenological analysis allows for the examination of Islamic identity from the perspective of the actors themselves – Muslim believers who form their religious self-awareness in a specific socio-historical context. Attention is paid not only to declarative attitudes, but also to everyday practices of faith, personal experience, and cultural memory, through which an individual constitutes his or her belonging to Islam.

Phenomenological analysis shows that for a significant portion of young people, Islam is becoming a form of symbolic protest against globalization and social injustice. At the same time, the Hanafi tradition acts as a value framework that ensures the harmonization of religious and civil identity. The second theoretical and methodological level is based on structural analysis used to study the institutional, political and ideological mechanisms that influence the formation of Islamic identity. Here, Islamic identity is considered as a product of interaction between macro- and meso-levels – between state institutions, religious organizations, educational systems and transnational structures.

According to the structural-functional approach, Islamic identity in Kazakhstan performs the functions of moral control, ethnic legitimation and social support. However, these functions are beginning to collapse in the context of the strengthening of informal religious authorities and the penetration of external ideological influences.

The structural approach made it possible to describe stable models of institutional interaction between the state and Islamic structures, as well as to identify the asymmetry of religious policies in different countries of the region.

To identify differences and similarities between the countries of the region, a comparative analysis was used based on the concept of religious regulation [23]. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan act as contrasting cases demonstrating different trajectories and logics of interaction between Islam, the state, and society: Kazakhstan as managed pluralism; Uzbekistan as centralized religious control; Kyrgyzstan as weak institutionalization.

This comparative approach allows not only to identify the specifics of the Kazakhstani model, but also to assess its sustainability in the context of regional dynamics.

The empirical basis of the study was: analytical reports of international organizations [24]; academic publications; materials of state and independent

studies, including data from national censuses and sociological surveys in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

Research on religiosity based on national censuses and mass sociological surveys is a common methodological practice, especially in countries with limited access to more in-depth field research. However, this methodology has serious limitations and disadvantages that must be taken into account when interpreting the data: firstly, this is the formality and superficiality of the questions. Censuses and mass surveys often ask limited, standardized questions (e.g., ‘What religion do you consider yourself to be?’), which allows for the recording of nominal identity, but does not reflect the degree of religiosity, level of practice, value orientations, or individual interpretations of faith. Cultural (traditional) and practicing (religious) identities are not distinguished.

Second, social desirability and self-censorship. In countries with a high level of religious legitimacy (e.g., Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan) or, conversely, with authoritarian restrictions on religion (e.g., Turkmenistan), respondents may distort their answers towards socially acceptable (or safe) forms.

Third, limited categories and classifications. Categories in questionnaires may not reflect the real diversity of religious life. For example, all Muslims are considered one group, without distinctions between Sunnis, Shiites, Sufis, Hanafis, etc. There is also no category for non-religious people who culturally identify with a religion.

Fourth, the inability to measure deep aspects of identity. Such studies do not capture internal motivation, personal transformations, forms of individualized faith or ‘private religiosity’ [25].

Fifth, unequal access and coverage, as well as time constraints. In some regions, especially rural and hard-to-reach ones, coverage may be limited, which distorts the data. At the same time, censuses are conducted every 10 years or even less frequently. Surveys can be random and unsystematic, and the dynamics of religiosity can change much faster under the influence of social, political, and economic factors.

Thus, the methodology based on censuses and mass surveys is useful for the primary mapping of religious identity, but it is categorically insufficient for analyzing the essential characteristics of religiosity, especially in the context of a post-Soviet, authoritarian, or transforming society.

The first part of the article analyzes the features of Islamic identity in the Central Asian countries in the wake of the post-Soviet religious revival. The phenomena of ethno-Islamic identification and traditional Islamic identity for the region (folk Islam) are identified and reconstructed.

Many studies note the desire of the peoples of Central Asia at the dawn of the independence of their states to manifest their ethno-Islamic identity, to identify their religiosity on a national basis. That is why, in the first attempts of the states of the region to measure religious identity, high rates of belonging to the Islamic faith were obtained among ethnic groups historically related to the Islamic tradition. When studying this problem, it is necessary to take into account the specifics of regions in which Islam is both the dominant religious

tradition and included in a multi-confessional cultural space where different religious identities interact (Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, etc.).

The second part of the study is aimed at identifying the features of Islamic identification in Kazakhstan, its manifestation in the indicators of religiosity (religious self-identification of Kazakhs) of the population, in relation to practicing believers. Particular attention is paid to the analysis of factors influencing the formation of Islamic identity in the country.

The third part of the article examines possible risks of radicalization of Islamic identity and the mechanisms and causes of Radicalization in Central Asia and Kazakhstan.

3. Results and Discussion

The conceptualization of Islamic identity in the post-Soviet space requires a critical examination of existing theoretical frameworks. Following Benedict Anderson's seminal work on imagined communities, religious identity functions as a form of imagined religious community that transcends geographical boundaries while simultaneously being rooted in specific cultural contexts [26]. However, Anderson's framework, while influential, inadequately addresses the complexities of post-colonial religious revival, particularly in contexts where religious identity intersects with national identity formation.

Stuart Hall's conceptualization of identity as 'identification' rather than a fixed essence provides a more nuanced framework for understanding Islamic identity in Kazakhstan [27]. Hall's emphasis on identity as a process of becoming rather than being aligns with the dynamic nature of Islamic identity formation observed in Central Asia. This processual understanding challenges essentialist approaches that view Islamic identity as monolithic or unchanging.

The theoretical framework proposed by Talal Asad regarding 'discursive traditions' in Islam offers a more sophisticated lens for analyzing Islamic identity formation [28]. Asad's critique of anthropological approaches to Islam emphasizes the importance of understanding Islamic practices within their historical and discursive contexts. This framework proves particularly relevant for understanding how Islamic identity in Kazakhstan has been shaped by both pre-Soviet Islamic traditions and contemporary global Islamic discourses.

Islamic identity, as conceptualized in this study, refers to the multidimensional process through which individuals and communities construct meaning and belonging through engagement with Islamic symbols, practices, and discourses. Drawing from Manuel Castells' theory of identity construction, Islamic identity encompasses three dimensions: legitimizing identity (derived from historical Islamic tradition), resistance identity (formed in opposition to secular or Western influences), and project identity (oriented toward future Islamic community building) [29].

This definition moves beyond simplistic religious/secular binaries to encompass the complex ways in which Islamic identity intersects with ethnic, national, and cultural identities. Following José Casanova's framework of

‘public religion’, Islamic identity in Kazakhstan operates simultaneously in private devotional practices and public cultural expression [30].

Religious revival, in the context of post-Soviet Central Asia, refers to the multifaceted process of re-Islamization that encompasses both institutional reconstruction and individual spiritual renewal. This concept builds upon Brown notion of ‘vicarious religion’ and ‘believing without belonging’ to understand how religious revival in secularized societies often takes hybrid forms [31].

The term ‘revival’ itself requires critical examination. As suggested by Adeeb Khalid’s work on Central Asian Islam, what appears as ‘revival’ may represent the emergence of new forms of Islamic practice rather than a simple return to pre-Soviet traditions [32]. This perspective challenges linear narratives of decline and renewal, emphasizing instead the innovative and adaptive nature of contemporary Islamic identity formation.

4. Main part

4.1. The Formation of Islamic Identity in the Context of Independence in Central Asia

In the realities of Kazakhstan, Islamic identity went through the stages of its formation, genesis and transformation. The disclosure of the essence of Islamic identity is possible through the process of studying the role of Islamic tradition for humanity. Through this process, the world is discovered for humanity and the Islamic worldview is revealed. The identification of an individual with Islam and the Islamic faith has been demonstrated to facilitate communication with adherents of Islam and other religious traditions. During the medieval period, the Islamic identity was defined by the unification of its adherents around a shared understanding and practice of Islamic tradition, albeit with regional and ethnic variations. However, as time progressed, this identity underwent an evolution, acquiring an increasingly ethnic dimension and transforming into an ethno-Islamic phenomenon. During the period of deconstruction of religious traditions and the dominance of atheistic doctrine, Islamic identity ‘turned’ into an identifier of nationality. The resurgence of Islamist movements in the post-Soviet space was precipitated by the dissolution of the USSR, marking a pivotal shift in the geopolitical landscape. This development occurred within the broader context of the formation of national identities across the post-Soviet region.

The search and recreation of the codes of national identity that accompanied the process of democratization in post-Soviet countries often led to the revitalization of the symbolism and axiology of religious traditions that had been marginalized during the Soviet period. The Soviet period was distinguished by a policy of persecution and harassment of religious organizations and clergy, as well as the seizure of religious property. Nevertheless, for certain political and strategic purposes, religion was instead employed as a consolidating factor in Muslim societies. The ambiguity of this approach in Soviet religious policy indicates that the Islamic identity was too fragmented, with widespread

oppression. In certain instances, this oppression manifested in a pronounced manner, rather than remaining merely ambiguous [33]. An ideology predicated upon atheism has displaced religious practices and feelings of believers from every day public life into the latent sphere as a syncretic combination of pre-Islamic (local cultural traditions and beliefs) and Islamic practices in the private space of the Muslim peoples of the Union. This factor was subsequently identified as a contributing element to the rapid religious revival observed in post-Soviet societies.

Consequently, the impact of Soviet policy on Islam in Central Asia should not be underestimated. According to Reuel R. Hanks, no other region of the Islamic world in the twentieth century has a similar history, during which a concentrated campaign was carried out at all levels of society to destroy both physical and psychological manifestations of faith. Consequently, it is unsurprising that the peoples of Central Asia reacted positively to the opportunity to reconstruct their Islamic identity. Furthermore, Hanks continues, this desire to reintegrate their societies with the Muslim Ummah, or the global Muslim community, is not motivated by the same forces that gave rise to the Iranian revolution, the rise of Al-Qaeda, or related manifestations of Islamic radicalism elsewhere. The Islamic renaissance that has occurred in Central Asia over the past decade was not the result of a rejection of modernity, a perceived threat from Western cultural imperialism, or a concern about the erosion of traditional Islamic values. Instead, it emerged because of a cultural renaissance that unfolded following a period of seventy years marked by repression [34, pp. 218].

Moreover, the Islamic renaissance was marked by a dichotomous character. On the one hand, there was a rise in the self-identification of Muslim populations in the post-Soviet region with the Islamic tradition. On the other hand, concerns regarding politicized Islam, often termed the 'Islamic factor' and its implications for the security and stability of the region began to surface. Uzbek scientist Farkhod Tolipov proposes a hypothesis that postulates the dissolution of the Soviet Union as a catalyst for two significant phenomena in the countries of Central Asia. It is his initial assertion that the desired outcome, namely independence, was successfully attained. Secondly, he posits that a multifaceted identity has emerged within the public consciousness. "Nationalism versus regionalism, democracy versus autocracy, Islam versus secularism is just some of the dichotomies that fill the minds of those who are seriously thinking about the future development and prospects of the region. Islam itself engenders a highly intricate backdrop against which the socio-political process in Central Asia is unfolding today" [35].

Islamic identity in the region manifests itself as a fusion of religious feeling, ethnicity, political ideologies and cultural codes.

The challenges associated with identifying a religious identity have now been compounded by the concept of 'colonial trauma', which is characterized by the loss of state, national, and cultural identity. This phenomenon was especially evident in the context of the unregulated influx of a wide array of traditional and non-traditional religious practices, cults and new religious movements.

Furthermore, democratization in post-Soviet countries has given rise to vigorous debates concerning the observance of the human right to freedom of religion and, consequently, the recognition of religious diversity. Concurrently, the Islamic cultural sphere is witnessing the emergence of a discourse that seeks to foster unity among co-religionists, promote enlightenment, and facilitate integration, while also guiding the Ummah towards the challenges posed by modernity.

The contemporary markers of Islamic identity, the quest for the 'right' Islamic identity, the correlation of Islamic identity with traditional elements and ethnic characteristics, and the prevention of radicalization of Islamic identity in a globalizing world, represent a problematic field in both geopolitical and humanities research contexts.

Consequently, conventional types of Islamic identity were conceptualized, including: the concept of Islamic identity can be categorized into several different types, including traditional, folk, ethno-Islamic, and new Islamic identities. The latter category is often referred to as 'pure Islam' [33].

In the countries of Central Asia, such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan, all these types of Islamic identity are represented. Furthermore, it is our contention that the national Islamic identity and the ethnic Islamic identity are conceptually congruent and that they can be considered commensurate. The two concepts are synonymous insofar as both denote the identification of Muslims with their national characteristics. This phenomenon can be explained by the fact that, in the process of reviving their national identity, representatives of Muslim peoples prefer to position their religious identity along with their national identity, identifying themselves as Uzbek Muslims, Kyrgyz Muslims, Kazakh Muslims, etc. In this instance, ethno-Islamic identity functions as a marker of nation-building. The relationship between religion and national identity in this region has been a subject of interest for scientists. Indeed, scientific works on Central Asia have frequently emphasized the close connection between Islam and nationality [36 - 38].

However, when studying religious identity, it is imperative to recognize that identification processes encompass a multitude of components that extend beyond nationality. An analysis of the identification of the peoples of the region under study indicates that a significant proportion of Muslims self-identify as part of the Islamic tradition on a national basis, perpetuating a familial tradition. However, this identification is often accompanied by a limited understanding of the foundational principles and historical development of Islam. This circumstance often gives rise to misunderstandings and differences of opinion with Muslims, who identify themselves primarily with the Islamic religion itself and all its components. Consequently, Islamic identification is characterized by a significantly more intricate relationship.

In the Islamic scientific literature of the post-Soviet space, there is a discourse surrounding the relationship between Islamic and Muslim identity. There is a divergence of opinion regarding their identity, as well as the existence of significant disparities between them [39 - 41]. For instance, Russian scientist Musa Kurbanov posits that the concept of Muslim identity is constrained and

applied in comparison with Islamic identity. The initial perception of Islam is shaped by the cultural and historical milieu, while the subsequent conception is derived from the religious portrayal of the world as articulated in the Quran. The Islamic identity is regarded as a unified entity, eternally established and predetermined by the contents of the Qur'an. Consequently, the concept of Islamic identity is believed to be multifaceted, with the number of individual Muslim identities being equivalent to the number of Muslim communities and individuals. The Islamic identity is formed based on a universal, absolute, dogmatic principle, while the Muslim one focuses on a specific practical, ritually active principle of Islam [42, pp. 35].

However, when studying research on Islamic identity, it is important to note that Islamic and Muslim identities are typically considered to be synonymous. This is predicated on the assumption that a Muslim individual acknowledges the values and norms outlined in the Koran, aligns their actions with Islamic principles, and consequently adopts an Islamic identity. However, it should be noted that the issue at hand is not analogous. To achieve a more complete and comprehensive disclosure of the entire complex of components of Islamic identity, it is important to understand that Islamic identity is multidimensional and dynamic; it should be considered both as a state and as a process. Islamic identity, akin to any other identity, is not a static phenomenon; it is subject to change, since the identification of an individual or group depends on myriad cultural, social, and political factors.

In Central Asia, there are processes related to cultural self-identification through historical tradition. Nevertheless, the return of Islamism and the cultural heritage of Islam is of the utmost importance in this context. Renowned scholars who have meticulously examined the challenges confronting Islam and Islamic identity in Central Asia have observed the heterogeneity of the Islamic development process, as well as the equivocal nature of its political and cultural function in the establishment of modern societies.

The nature of Islam in secular, multi-confessional, pluralistic states (as opposed to theocratic ones) is not one of solidity, but of extraordinary character, diversity, and dynamism. For instance, Vincent M. Artman draws upon ethnographic field research conducted in Kyrgyzstan in 2014, analyzing two variants of Islamic discourse in modern Kyrgyzstan: ethno-traditionalism and normative Hanafism. These two concepts are positioned in relation to certain common narratives related to Kyrgyz history and national identity. However, the way these traditions are mobilized and utilized varies considerably, as do the ideas about Islam and its relationship to the Kyrgyz. Within the ethno-traditionalist paradigm, it is the embodied fulfillment of the 'national tradition' itself – through ziyarat, traditional healing practices, ayanas, and personal encounters with spirits – that serves as a means by which relations between Islam and nationality are established. Conversely, normative Hanafism conceptualizes the nation and religion in historical and cultural terms, as well as from the point of view of the Hanafi tradition. In this context, the national tradition is considered valid only to the extent that it does not contradict the Islamic orthodoxy as interpreted by the muftiate. It is evident that the distinction

between Islam and non-Islamic belief systems is a subject of perpetual contention [38, pp. 210-211].

An analysis of the Islamic component and identity in Uzbekistan and the Central Asian region, as conducted by researcher Anita Sengupt, concludes that Islam in Central Asia does not possess a monolithic structure. The region is distinguished by a dynamic interplay among various Islamic sects, including dogmatic religions, Sufism, 'official' Islam and 'popular' Islam [22, pp. 3649].

In addition to national Islamic self-identification, pre-Islamic traditions and cults involving the veneration of the ancestral spirit, pilgrimage to holy places, and healing are concurrently reviving and continuing to operate in the Muslim countries of the region. In some cases, these traditions exhibit an eclectic interpenetration with Islamic elements. Additionally, there has been a notable increase in the level of activity associated with Sufi practices. The historical and cultural affiliations of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to Sufism have been characterized by its spiritual proximity to the nomadic populations of these regions. The name of H.A. Yassavi, who introduced Sufi spirituality, is sacred and deeply revered by the Turkic peoples. A distinguishing characteristic of Sufism is its adherence to a form of 'democracy' in relation to the ceremonial Islamic practices it engages in. The foundational tenet of Sufism is the embodiment of divine love through virtuous actions, emphasizing the importance of spontaneous, unstructured ritualization. A salient feature of this movement is its repudiation of folk cultural values and beliefs, a stance that led to its extensive penetration of the Turkic world.

The Islamic identity of Central Asia is predominantly that of the traditional Islamic identity for the region itself. This observation suggests the presence of a regional element. The resurgence of Islam and the re-emergence of religious identification are concomitant with the revival of spiritual and cultural traditions of yesteryear.

When the term 'traditional Islam' is employed, it is important to recognize that there are two perspectives that can be held regarding the nature of this Islamic tradition. The determination of what constitutes a 'traditional' concept is a matter that is open to interpretation. The designation of Arab Islam as 'traditional' is predicated on the geographical origins of the religion itself. This principle is currently upheld by traditionalists and fundamentalists within Islam. This perspective is predicated on the notion that Islam should be devoid of any incongruities arising from the amalgamation of local and regional cultural characteristics. The proponents of this position assert that it should be supranational in nature and exclusively based on the tenets outlined in the Quran and the Sunnah. It is reasonable to reach a consensus on this matter. However, historical analysis indicates that Islam has frequently initiated a harmonious process of complementary development in a particular ethno-cultural zone. Islam has its own theological schools, which adapt it to various cultural and socio-economic conditions, including a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional environment. Consequently, the term 'traditional Islam' is employed to denote a historically established form of religious practice within a specific geographical territory.

In this regard, it is imperative to emphasize the flexibility and adaptability of Islam, wherein other expressions of Islam can become ‘traditional’, incorporating the most salient spiritual traditions of the peoples among whom it has disseminated, without compromising the fundamental tenets and moral principles of Islam. The designation in question can be either ‘Kazakh Islam’, ‘Tajik’ or ‘Uzbek’. The Islamic identity of the Central Asian countries, as well as other types of Islamic identity, is characterized by reliance on a specific madhhab (in this case, the Hanafi Madhhab), which has contributed to the formation of an ethno-Islamic identity.

The process of deconstruction of Islamic identity is occurring within the broader context of global identification and the radicalization of Islamic consciousness. In such circumstances, it is imperative to uphold one’s own, traditionally established Islamic identity. For Kazakh society, this Islamic identity is deeply rooted in the tradition of the Sunni Hanafi madhhab, which seamlessly integrates tolerance, rationalism, pragmatism, and a profound communicative potential for dialogue between the Self and the Other, as well as between different religious identities. This Islamic identity also fosters internal Islamic dialogue in the context of the unification of the Ummah.

It is evident that Islamic identities in the post-Soviet space are subject to variation depending on the region, the role of the predominant ethnic group or nation in the foundation of religious tradition, and the rigidity or softness of the secular course of the state. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify the predominant form of Islamic identity, which is characterized by traditional Islamic belief systems that incorporate elements of nationality and secularism. The formation of this identity was significantly influenced by spiritual and cultural-historical traditions. Nevertheless, the long-term sustainability of this identity is contingent upon the political and ideological trajectory of the nation.

In the post-Soviet period, Islamic identity has become an important element in the formation of new socio-cultural contours of Central Asia. Despite the common Soviet legacy and the predominance of Sunni Islam of the Hanafi madhhab, each country in the region demonstrates unique trajectories of religious evolution, determined not only by official religious policy, but also by historical memory, the structure of ethnicity, and the degree of public receptivity to Islamic discourse.

Kazakhstan: Islam as an Instrument of Cultural Legitimation

In the Republic of Kazakhstan, Islam is more often perceived as a symbol of ethnocultural identity than as a doctrinally formulated religious practice. Despite the fact that more than 70% of the population identify themselves as Muslims (Pew Research Center), the level of everyday religious engagement remains relatively low. The state model of ‘tolerant Islam’ is focused on maintaining confessional balance and secular identity, while the spiritual sphere is institutionalized within the framework of the activities of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan (SAMK). Islam in this context acts primarily as a cultural and national marker integrated into the civil nation project. The following are characteristic features: religion acts as a component of

ethnic identity; limited access to religious education and infrastructure; institutional control over the religious sphere.

Kyrgyzstan: Hybrid Forms of Religiosity and Pluralism

Kyrgyzstan is an example of religious dynamics with a high degree of pluralism and fragmentation of Islamic identity. Despite the fact that Islam is declared the main religion for more than 90% of the population, its practices vary: from observing rituals at key stages of the life cycle to everyday orthodoxy, which, according to various sources, covers only about 14% of the population [43]. The influence of traditional beliefs, such as the cult of ancestors and the sacralization of natural objects, also remains, indicating a stable coexistence of orthodox and folk Islam. In Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, ancestor veneration and sacralization of objects also exist at the level of cultural and traditional practices.

The religious policy of Kyrgyzstan is characterized by a lower degree of state intervention, which has led to the emergence and functioning of various Islamic movements - from Salafism to Sufism and the Tablighi Jamaat movement. Such openness, on the one hand, stimulates religious mobilization, and on the other, gives rise to the risks of ideological fragmentation. Thus, the religious identification of Kyrgyzstan is influenced by: syncretic coexistence of orthodoxy and popular religiosity; weak institutional control over the religious sphere; geographical polarization of religiosity (the south is more religious, the north is more secular); vulnerability to ideological radicalism due to a lack of regulation.

Uzbekistan: institutionalized religiosity and political traditionalism

Uzbekistan demonstrates the most stable and historically rooted model of Islamic identity in the region. The role of Islam in national memory is reinforced by the symbolic legacy of great theologians such as Imam al-Bukhari and al-Tirmidhi, whose figures are actively used by the state to shape an approved form of religious identity [44]. Despite the fact that the level of religious identification exceeds 88% [24], Islam in Uzbekistan is subject to strict institutional oversight. The central instrument of control is the Spiritual Administration of Muslims, together with such scientific centers as the Imam Bukhari Islamic Research Center. Since Shavkat Mirziyoyev came to power, there has been a moderate liberalization of religious policy: the restoration of madrassas, the revival of the Hajj, and the development of Islamic scholarship. Nevertheless, official rhetoric continues to be based on the paradigm of 'moderate traditionalism' aimed at preventing the politicization of Islam and strict state regulation. Comparative analysis shows that Islamic identity in Central Asian countries is developing along asynchronous trajectories, influenced by a combination of political, historical, and sociocultural factors. Kazakhstan demonstrates a model of ethnocultural Islam within the framework of a secular state paradigm; Kyrgyzstan – a model of hybrid and pluralistic identity with a high level of fragmentation; Uzbekistan – institutionally organized religiosity with a strong reliance on historical tradition. Thus, in the region, it is possible to identify a dominant type of Islamic identity that combines elements of traditional doctrine,

secularism, and folk religiosity. Its formation was conditioned by both the historical and cultural heritage and current political and ideological attitudes. The prospects for the sustainability of these identities depend on the flexibility of religious policies, the level of religious education, and the ability of states to integrate Islam into the public space without radicalizing it.

The formation of Islamic identity in post-Soviet Central Asia, especially in Kazakhstan, is a multi-layered process involving diverse actors with diverse interests, resources, and forms of influence. Islamic discourse does not develop in isolation, but is structured through the intersection of formal institutions, informal religious traditions, transnational networks, and digital media platforms.

Formal institutions and the strategy of managed Islam

The central actor in the institutionalization of Islam in Kazakhstan is the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan (SAMK), a religious organization that performs the functions of regulation, control, and production of normative Islamic knowledge. As Peyrouse [45] and Zhussipbek [46] emphasize, the SAMK acts less as a religious body than as an instrument of state modernization aimed at adapting Islam to the requirements of a secular nation-state. The SAMK controls religious personnel, standardizes the content of sermons, licenses educational institutions, and thereby integrates religious practices into the framework of the official ideology, which emphasizes moderation, ethno-confessional loyalty, and apoliticality. Such institutionalization makes Islam safe for the state, but reduces the authority of religious leaders among the population, especially among young people who are inclined to search for an 'authentic' religious experience.

Local religious traditions and everyday identity

Outside the official field, local bearers of religious authority function - ustazes, rural imams, elders, and keepers of the adat tradition. Their influence is especially noticeable in peripheral and rural areas, where trust in state structures is limited, and religious life is intertwined with local cultural practices. They form a type of Islamic identity based on: a synthesis of adat and sharia; family religious tradition; rituals that are not always recognized by official dogma.

This type of religiosity forms a contextualized Islam that relies not on theological orthodoxy, but on living experience, family rituals, and intergenerational transmission of faith. This is not the Islam of an intellectual school, but the Islam of 'everyday life' - a phenomenon described in terms of E. Husserl's phenomenology as religiosity built into everyday life, rather than articulated through a doctrinal system.

This form of identity, despite the lack of systemic theological training, is highly stable due to cultural inertia, making it a key channel for 'grassroots' religious socialization.

Transnational influences and alternative forms of Islamization

Since the early 1990s, the region has seen an active penetration of transnational Islamic networks offering other models of religious socialization. Such agents include various foundations in Arab countries, educational and

religious programs in Turkey, Iran, Pakistani and South Asian networks, including Tablighi Jamaat.

These actors disseminate alternative narratives of Islamic identity through educational scholarships, religious courses, translated literature and digital resources. They compete with state institutions, forming a field of interpretive polyphony, where Islam becomes an arena for ideological choice.

The Kazakhstan model demonstrates an attempt at selective integration: through filtering foreign influences and legitimizing only those forms that are compatible with the concept of 'national Islam'. This contrasts, for example, with the more decentralized religious policy in Kyrgyzstan, where transnational networks operate in a less constrained manner [47].

Digital Media as an Independent Actor

Modern digital technologies and social networks YouTube, Telegram, Instagram and TikTok have become an independent agent of religious formation. Unlike classical institutions, digital media create fragmented and visualized forms of religious experience that are not limited by hierarchy and doctrinal linearity [48].

Young audiences derive Islamic meanings from short, emotionally charged media formats, where authority is determined not by knowledge, but by charisma, audience, and algorithms. This leads to the formation of a media subject of Islam - hybrid, unstable, emotional. Such forms of identity are difficult to control or fit into the framework of 'official Islam'.

The diversity of agents leads to the emergence of an internal field of tension, where a struggle unfolds for the interpretation of the canonical norm, a monopoly on spiritual leadership, and the right to produce legitimate religious knowledge.

This situation reflects the pluralization of the religious field and the complication of the very nature of Islamic identity: it can no longer be reduced to a single institution or tradition, but is formed at the intersection of the local, global, and digital.

4.2. The Expression of Islamic Identity in Kazakhstan

Islamic or Muslim self-identification is understood to be a definitive marker of religious identity. When attempting to quantify the religious identification of the population, the relationship between religiosity and religious identity becomes problematic. A review of sociological research and measurements within the country in this area reveals the use of both concepts when describing citizens' involvement in religious teachings. Within the scientific community, discourse frequently encompasses the concepts of religious self-identification, the extent of religiosity within the populace, and the affiliation of individuals with specific religious denominations.

The concept of religiosity has been comprehensively defined by researchers, who have identified the following main elements: religious worldview and experience, religious self-awareness and faith, religious practices and attitudes, and understanding of symbolism. In many cases, religious

behavior, religious consciousness and religious relations are distinguished in the structure of religiosity. This phenomenon is thus understood as a particular state, both of individuals and of societies, which is characterized by belief in the supernatural. This belief system constitutes an object of worship within a particular religious doctrine. In this case, religiosity can be considered a system-forming factor of religious identity, allowing an individual believer and/or a group to maintain their integrity independently from other identification practices. The relationship between religious identification and religiosity can be conceptualized as the process by which individuals appropriate and construct a particular semantic construct based on their religious affiliation. This process contributes to the formation of their religious identity [49]. The former is understood to act as a marker of religiosity, which is then ‘pushed outward’ by the religious group through its presentation in everyday socio-cultural practices. This concept is not static; it is subject to change over time and may intersect with other types of social identity, including political, national, and professional identities.

According to the results of the Pew Research Center study ‘How the Global Religious Landscape Has Changed from 2010 to 2020’, the number of Muslims in Kazakhstan in 2010 was 69.7%, and in 2020 77.9% of the total population, that is, over ten years, the number of Muslims has increased by 8.2% [24].

But studies conducted within the country show slightly different indicators. According to two National Population Censuses conducted in Kazakhstan in 2009 and 2021, the number of those who profess Islam remained virtually unchanged, 70.2% (2009) and 69.3% (2021), respectively. These differences may be due to different research formats, the use of different survey methods, as well as compliance with population growth in general over the past ten years. Visually, in everyday space, in public rhetoric in Kazakhstan as a whole, there is an increase in the Muslim component of the population. In this regard, the Pew Research Center figures provide more reliable evidence of the growth of Muslims in the country. However, at the same time, according to the results of the National Census, which included a question on religion, the proportion of those who identify themselves with one faith or another decreased from 96.7% in 2009 to 86.6% in 2021. [50 - 51]. Considering that the bulk of the population is made up of Kazakhs, who mostly identify themselves as Muslims, the decline is greater among Muslims.

It is imperative to acknowledge that these indicators of the number of adherents do not invariably reflect the true number of such. Firstly, a proportion of respondents declined to participate in the survey. Secondly, it is a common characteristic of all post-Soviet, multi-confessional states to associate their religious identity with national identity. Thirdly, a mounting body of sociological research, undertaken by a range of state and non-governmental organizations, has yielded evidence that substantiates the delineation of believers into two distinct categories: nominal (religious beliefs) and practitioners (religious practice).

According to one of the most recent studies of the religious situation in Kazakhstan in 2024, the religious self-identification of respondents is as follows. In general, 86.8% of Kazakhstanis consider themselves believers. In particular, 62.7% (68.3% in Q3 2024) limit themselves to observing certain rituals and holidays, while 24.1% are religious practitioners. 65.1% (Q3 70.3%) of the population adhere to the Hanafi madhhab of Islam, supporters of other directions of Islam made up 11.6% (Q3 7.2%, an increase of +4.4%). Among the youth, supporters of the Hanafi madhhab of Islam are 67.0% (Q3 72.0%, a decrease of -5.0%), other directions of Islam - 10.1% (Q3 7.3%). In terms of regions, the Hanafi madhhab is most adhered to by residents of the Zhambyl region (83.3%), Ulytau region (81.3%), Turkestan region (79.4%), and the city of Shymkent (80.0%). Other directions of Islam are more adhered to by residents of the Atyrau region - 40.0% (3rd quarter 82.9%) [52, pp. 30-31].

The findings of sociological research conducted by Kazakhstani scientists at the Institute of Philosophy, Political Science and Religious Studies suggest that religious self-identification records stable trends when nominal believers (non-practitioners and non-members of communities) predominate in the population. The study also reveals that young people and the middle-aged generation dominate among practicing believers and that the number of Islamic youths is growing, whilst the number of Orthodox youths is decreasing (Figure 1.) [53, pp. 641]. Additionally, there has been a notable increase in the number of individuals identifying as non-denominational believers and atheists. The study revealed a decline in religious engagement (as indicated by the parameter ‘believer, member of a community, follow religious precepts’) concomitant with an increase in the age of the respondents. The 2020 study revealed that 23.2% of 18-24-year-olds, 19.4% of 25-34-year-olds, 15.2% of 35-44-year-olds, and 11.7% of 45-54-year-olds belong to a religious community and adhere to its religious norms [54, pp. 80].

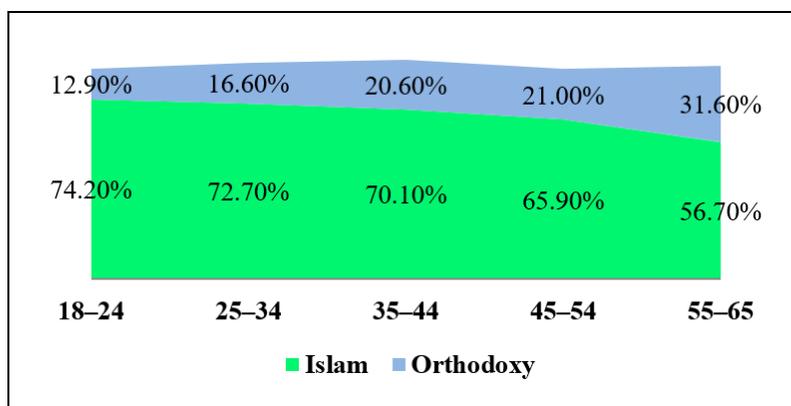


Figure 1. Distribution of respondents who adhere to Islam and Orthodoxy (age group, N=1800, %, 2020)

The predominance of the nominal Islamic identity of religiosity in the 2020 monitoring revealed that 53.7% of respondents who identified themselves

with Islam and considered themselves believers did not participate in religious life. According to the findings of the study, 21.1% of the participants identified as active believers who engage in the activities of a religious community and adhere to the fundamental religious norms and regulations (see Table 1.) [54, pp. 639].

In their study, Barbara Junisbai and Azamat Junisbai have demonstrated the significance of comprehending the degree of religiosity by differentiating between practicing, partially practicing, and non-practicing believers.

After the conduction of surveys in 2007 and 2012, the authors sought to present the changes in religious identity in dynamics using the example of two states, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The findings of this study are largely consistent with those of previous research, thereby confirming the hypothesis that, despite strong self-identification with Islam, religious beliefs and practices in Central Asia are indeed diverse. In Kyrgyzstan, a discernible trend towards increased participation in religious practice has been observed over time. Conversely, in Kazakhstan, an observed tendency towards either maintenance of a low level of participation or even a slight decrease has been documented. However, concomitantly, by 2012 Kazakhstan had emerged as a leader in terms of the share of the most determined supporters of Sharia (see Table 2.) [55, pp. 10-11].

Table 1. Confessional self-identification of respondents (N=1800, %, 2020)

Attitude to religion	Islam	Orthodoxy	I don't consider myself a religious person	An unbeliever (and I am) (an atheist)
I am a believer, I belong to a community, I follow religious norms	21.1	7.1	4.4	0.0
I am a believer, but I do not participate in religious life	53.7	63.8	21.1	2.9
I am a believer, but I do not belong to religious denominations	14.6	15.9	25.6	1.5
I am an unbeliever, but because of my family, I adhere to religious rituals and traditions	5.0	2.2	14.4	8.8
I am an unbeliever, but I respect believers	3.2	8.5	23.3	58.8
Indifferent to religion	1.0	1.6	1.10	20.6
I am an unbeliever and have a negative attitude towards religion	0.2	0.3	0.0	7.4

Table 2. Trends in religiosity by country, %, 2007 and 2012

Percentage of respondents who:	Kazakhstan		Kyrgyzstan	
	2007 (n = 606)	2012 (n = 912)	2007 (n = 839)	2012 (n = 1383)
Self-identify as Muslim	79.87	93.53	97.50	94.79
Express belief in life after death	36.30	51.54	71.39	66.67
Express belief in hell	41.58	57.24	72.59	73.10
Express belief in heaven	43.73	60.64	72.94	78.45

Attend religious services at least once a week	15.51	12.72	15.38	32.61
Pray to God daily outside of religious services	22.94	18.20	35.76	57.99
Believe that is very important that 'good government should implement only shari'a law'	5.45	13.04	7.15	10.34

The present study is predicated on an analysis of Kazakhstani socio-humanitarian studies. The objective of the present study is to present several measurements of religious affiliation, including Islamic self-identification. It is imperative to acknowledge that none of this type of research purports to be definitive, and quantifying religious identity poses significant challenges. Nevertheless, the necessity for sociological measurements is dictated by the tasks of recording, describing, and understanding the religious situation in its totality, researching its trends, and analyzing institutional influences on identification processes and strategies, both in personal and social projections.

The events of recent years and the evolution of the religious landscape in the region have prompted a re-evaluation of the relationship between religious identity and civil identity, secular principles of the state and the religious beliefs and practices of citizens, religious pluralism and Islamic unification, traditional cultural values and new religious values, and so forth.

At the present stage of development of the religious situation in both Kazakhstan and the rest of Central Asia, the issue of 'religious revival' is shifting from the 'national' discourse to a more 'practical' context, where the problems of everyday practices in Islam are raised. In instances of contention pertaining to the observance of hijab and religious accoutrements within a secular milieu, the dissolution of marriages, the matter of polygamy, and the adherence to Sharia law superseding state legislation, a comprehensive resolution is imperative. The present study explores the implications of religious policy and the radicalization of certain Islamic groups for the preservation of religious communities. The analysis examines the processes of intra-confessional schism, which have been observed to lead to significant consequences in terms of societal and state security.

The present discussion pertains to the notion of the 'Islamic factor' and the issue of radicalizing Islamic identity. The tragic terrorist events that have occurred in major Kazakh cities, including Taraz, Aktobe, and Almaty, have exposed the grave ramifications of the gradual radicalization process, particularly among the youth demographic. A growing body of evidence suggests that a confluence of factors, including religious illiteracy, social challenges, and the activities of radical extremist groups, is contributing to a state of 'clouding the minds' among Muslim believers. Despite the efforts of the official clergy in their role to educate and clarify the tenets and practices of Islam, there are individuals, known as 'hunters', namely 'Ustazs', who represent religious movements not native to Kazakhstan. Through their sermons, which are not always accurate and frequently taken out of context, these individuals seek to impose their own interpretation of religion, with the aim of destabilizing and undermining national and state security. The so-called radical neophytes have been observed to urge their supporters to unquestioningly adhere to their ideology and to blindly follow the orders and instructions of the group's leaders.

The consequences of radicalism are profoundly destructive, encompassing the erosion of personality, the severing of familial ties, the repudiation of national, cultural, and civic values, and the advocacy of opposition to state and social institutions. This ideological fervor can ultimately culminate in the declaration of jihad against dissidents and non-believers. The radicalization of such ideologies frequently results in the perpetration of terrorist acts, both within the territorial boundaries of a nation and in extraterritorial contexts.

The unresolved social problems of society, including the increased poverty, social injustice, corruption risks, unemployment, the uncontrolled increase in the cost of goods, the lack of social elevators for different groups of the population, and other economic problems, have the potential to trigger the development of protest sentiments, mobilization of destructive activities, and Islamic radicalization. The challenge of combating contemporary radicalism in both domestic and international contexts is attributable to the necessity of addressing radical ideology among the youth demographic, who are susceptible to its influence.

According to experts, in Kazakhstan, the prerequisite for marginalization may be not only socio-economic reasons, but also the transition to a religious lifestyle. A review of the extant research indicates that the norms of Orthodox Islam are challenging to align with those of secular communities in contemporary Kazakhstan. The study participants noted that following their transition to active belief systems, communication with their former environments became more challenging. Concurrently, challenges emerge not only in terms of sustaining social connections but also in the execution of routine tasks [56].

A salient aspect of the research on Islam that concerns the study of everyday practices is the expansion of the scope of religious attributes, religious holidays and rituals, and religious terminology. This expansion is manifested in the increased frequency of the use of these religious elements in the daily life of society. In the contemporary era, this factor operates as the prevailing trend and frequently engenders considerable controversy and discourse within Kazakhstan and its neighboring countries, namely Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

The issue of hijabs being worn in secular institutions, for instance, has been identified as a contentious topic in Kazakh society, giving rise to heated debates. The attitude of the population towards religious clothing is an important aspect of socio-cultural dynamics and demonstrates the complex interrelationships between religious expressions and public opinion. In recent decades, there has been an increasing interest in issues related to the right to wear religious clothing in various societies. The Kazakh information field is subject to intermittent discourse pertaining to the wearing of hijabs in educational institutions, places of employment, and other settings. The debate surrounding the appropriate role of religious symbols in public spaces has been a contentious one. Proponents of secularism and neutrality regarding religious expression contend that the display of religious paraphernalia in such settings is an infringement on personal liberty and a manifestation of religious discrimination. Conversely, those who oppose the prohibition of religious

symbols contend that such measures are discriminatory and infringe upon the rights of religious minorities.

In this regard, in 2023, the Committee on Religious Affairs of the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan conducted a study entitled ‘Assessment of state policy in the religious sphere by the population of Kazakhstan’. The objective of the study was to examine the attitude of the population to the wearing of Muslim clothing and objects. The survey results indicate that approximately 50% of respondents exhibited a neutral stance, with a percentage of 48.7% being indicative of this. Concurrently, the prevailing negative attitude towards the demonstration of religiosity through certain attributes has been found to exceed the positive attitude by almost two times, with figures standing at 31% and 16.3%, respectively (Figure 2) [57, pp. 39].

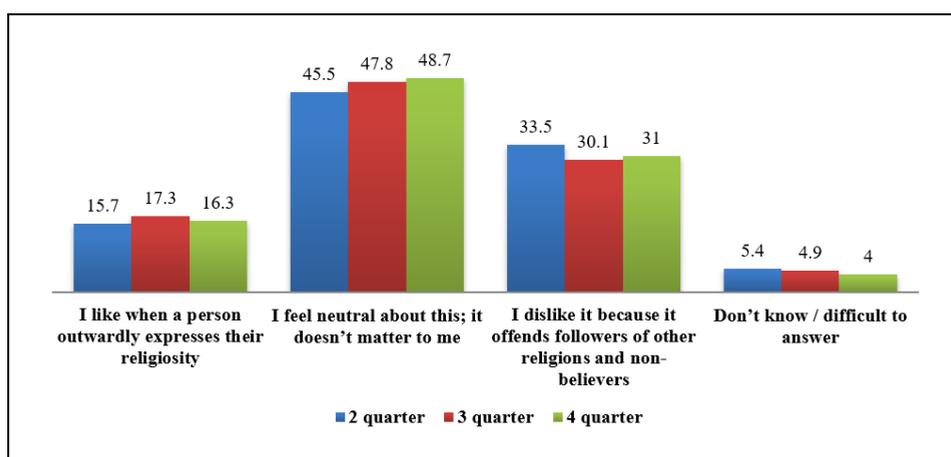


Figure 2. Distribution of responses to the question: ‘Do you like that some Muslims wear clothes and items that demonstrate religious affiliation (hijabs, niqabs etc.)?’, %

It is noteworthy that an alternative study was conducted in 2022 by the Public Foundation Center for Social and Political Studies ‘Strategy’ in the cities of Kazakhstan. In this study, respondents were invited to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with a series of statements that served as indicators of secularism. The results of the study indicated that 57.2% of respondents expressed agreement with the need to organize prayer rooms in public places. A survey revealed that 40.9% of respondents expressed support for the continued operation of religious schools in Kazakhstan. A survey of Kazakhstani citizens revealed that one in three respondents (more than 33%) believe that there should be no restrictions on wearing the hijab in government agencies, schools, and other educational institutions [58, pp. 50–51]. The survey’s findings indicate a predominant citizen commitment to secularism and disapproval of religious influence in state affairs. However, a significant proportion of respondents demonstrated a proclivity for clericalism and a repudiation of secularism.

The proposal of an additional marker that may signal the clericalization of society, and potentially even the radicalization of consciousness, is a

conceivable theoretical postulate. This marker is indicative of the population's endorsement of the concept of a religious state. This marker was also relevant in the study of Islamic identity, especially after Kazakhstanis began to travel to places of military operations on the territory of Islamic states.

Consequently, the results of a 2020 survey conducted as part of a study by the Kazakhstan Institute of Philosophy, Political Science and Religious Studies indicate that many respondents believe that the state should maintain its secular status, whilst being predominantly influenced by the Islamic tradition (77.8%). The proportion of respondents expressing confidence in the prospect of Kazakhstan becoming a religious state, in which all aspects of life are governed by religious traditions, was 22.2% of the total sample (Figure 3.) [53, pp. 648].

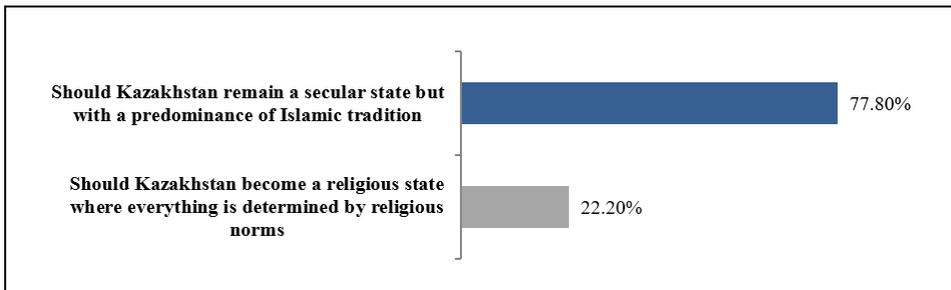


Figure 3. Should Kazakhstan remain a secular state / become a religious state (meaning 'YES', population, N=1800, %, 2020)

The rise in the proportion of individuals who advocate for a theocratic state poses a significant challenge to the tenets of secularism and interfaith unity within a democratic framework. Engaging in continuous monitoring of this trend is imperative to ensure the formulation of optimal decisions, trajectories, and mechanisms for the development of a secular society in a timely manner.

In conclusion, it is imperative to underscore the following trends in the evolution of Islamic identity in Kazakhstan: Recent studies have indicated an increase in both traditional and non-traditional expressions of religiosity, particularly among younger demographics. This religiosity is manifested through the adoption of specific attire and behaviors, such as the growing prevalence of beards and the wearing of shorts, as well as through advocacy for the establishment of a theocratic state or one that is predominantly influenced by Islamic tradition. Concurrently, the phenomenon of concurrent nominal religiosity persists, characterized by the maintenance of religious practices without their active observance. The construction of religiosity in Kazakh society is undergoing a dynamic process of development, manifesting as an eclectic synthesis of fragments from various faiths, cults, and traditions. This phenomenon can be attributed to the confluence of two major influences: firstly, the pre-Islamic traditions and worldviews that have been a part of Kazakh society for centuries; and secondly, the recent influx of new near-religious teachings and practices.

4.3. Mechanisms and Causes of Radicalization in Central Asia and Kazakhstan

The phenomenon of radicalization in Central Asia, particularly in Kazakhstan, represents a complex convergence of historical, social, economic, and psychological factors that have emerged in the post-Soviet period. Understanding these mechanisms requires moving beyond simplistic Western-centric interpretations to examine the specific contextual dynamics that shape Islamic identity formation and political extremism in the region. This analysis draws upon multiple theoretical frameworks to illuminate the multifaceted nature of radicalization processes in Kazakhstan and the broader Central Asian context.

Radicalization is defined as the process through which individuals or groups adopt increasingly extreme political, social, or religious views that legitimate the use of violence or rejection of democratic norms, following Quintan Wiktorowicz's model of Islamic activism that distinguishes between quietist, political, and jihadist orientations within Islamic movements [59]. However, this conceptualization requires careful contextualization within Central Asian societies, as Western frameworks often fail to account for the specific historical and social contexts of post-Soviet Muslim societies.

The collapse of the Soviet Union created unprecedented conditions for radical identity formation in Kazakhstan. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' provides insight into how social and economic marginalization creates conditions conducive to radical identity adoption [60]. The disruption of traditional social structures following Soviet collapse created what Zygmunt Bauman termed 'liquid modernity' – a condition of uncertainty and instability that facilitates radical identity adoption [61].

This transformation fundamentally altered the social fabric of Kazakhstani society. The spiritual vacuum created opportunities for alternative ideological systems, including radical Islamic movements, to offer comprehensive worldviews and social belonging.

Economic inequality and limited social mobility create what Ted Gurr identified as 'relative deprivation' – a psychological state that can motivate radical action when combined with ideological frameworks that promise dramatic social transformation [62]. In the Kazakhstani context, this manifests particularly among urban youth who experience disconnect between aspirational identities and available opportunities.

The oil-driven economic growth in Kazakhstan has created significant wealth disparities, with benefits concentrated among urban elites while rural populations and marginalized urban communities experience persistent poverty. This economic stratification becomes particularly problematic when combined with visible symbols of Western consumption and lifestyle aspirations promoted through global media. Young people, especially those with higher education but limited economic prospects, become susceptible to radical narratives that promise both spiritual fulfillment and social transformation.

At the individual level, radicalization operates through what Arie Kruglanski and colleagues term ‘quest for significance’ – the fundamental human need for meaning and importance that can be exploited by radical movements [63]. This psychological need becomes particularly acute in contexts of rapid social change and identity uncertainty.

The search for authentic identity represents a crucial factor in radicalization processes. Many young Kazakhs experience what can be termed ‘identity fragmentation’ – uncertainty about their place within traditional Kazakhstani culture, new ideological concepts of modern Kazakhstan, and contemporary globalized society. Radical Islamic movements offer clear, unambiguous identity categories and strong community belonging that can be attractive to individuals experiencing such uncertainty.

This identity crisis is compounded by the complexity of Kazakhstani society, which must navigate between traditional nomadic culture, contemporary nation-building projects, and global cultural influences. For many young people, radical Islamic identity offers a way to transcend these complexities by adopting a supposedly universal and authentic identity that connects them to a global community of believers.

Following Michel Foucault’s analysis of discourse and power, radicalization can be understood as a process of subjection to discursive formations that construct specific forms of Islamic subjectivity [64]. Radical Islamic discourses in Kazakhstan often draw upon global jihadist narratives while adapting to local grievances and cultural contexts.

These discourses operate through sophisticated mechanisms of subject formation that individuals into Islamic identities. They combine global jihadist ideological frameworks with local grievances, creating powerful narratives that explain individual suffering through broader frameworks of Islamic struggle against Western imperialism, secular corruption, and religious persecution.

The role of transnational Islamic networks in facilitating radicalization cannot be understated. These networks operate through multiple channels – including digital media, educational institutions, religious organizations, and personal relationships – to disseminate radical ideologies adapted to local contexts. The sophistication of these networks lies in their ability to present global jihadist narratives in ways that resonate with local grievances and cultural sensibilities.

The broader Central Asian context significantly influences radicalization dynamics in Kazakhstan. The region’s position at the intersection of Russian, Chinese, and Western spheres of influence creates complex geopolitical tensions that radical movements exploit. Regional conflicts, particularly in Afghanistan and Syria, provide both ideological inspiration and practical training opportunities for Central Asian radicals.

The porous borders and shared cultural heritage across Central Asian states facilitate the movement of radical ideologies and personnel. Events in neighboring countries – such as the civil war in Tajikistan, political instability in Kyrgyzstan, or authoritarian repression in Uzbekistan – create regional dynamics that influence radicalization processes across the region.

The Kazakhstani state's response to radicalization has involved both repressive measures and attempts at religious regulation. However, these responses often prove counterproductive, as heavy-handed security measures can reinforce radical narratives about state persecution of Islam. The state's attempt to control religious discourse through official Islamic institutions often lacks legitimacy among young people seeking authentic religious identity.

The challenge for the Kazakhstani state lies in developing counter-radicalization strategies that address underlying structural causes while avoiding the trap of reinforcing the very grievances that radical movements exploit. This requires sophisticated understanding of the mechanisms outlined above and development of alternative frameworks for identity formation and social belonging.

The mechanisms and causes of radicalization in Central Asia and Kazakhstan represent a complex interaction of structural, individual, and discursive factors that emerged from the specific historical context of post-Soviet transformation. Understanding these mechanisms requires moving beyond simplistic Western-centric frameworks to examine the ways in which global processes interact with local contexts to create conditions conducive to radical identity formation.

Effective responses to radicalization must address the underlying structural causes – economic inequality, social marginalization, identity uncertainty – while providing alternative frameworks for meaning-making and community belonging. This requires sophisticated understanding of the theoretical frameworks outlined above and recognition that radicalization represents a symptom of broader social and political challenges facing post-Soviet societies in the contemporary global context.

The analysis demonstrates that radicalization in Kazakhstan cannot be understood simply as a religious phenomenon but must be examined as a complex social process that involves political, economic, cultural, and psychological dimensions. Only through such comprehensive analysis can effective strategies for addressing radicalization be developed that respect the complexity and specificity of Central Asian contexts.

In general, religious radicalization in Central Asia is heterogeneous and closely linked to the type of governance, the degree of social instability and transnational ideological flows. The least susceptible countries are those with institutional prevention and moderate religious freedom, such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, while the most vulnerable are those with high repression (Tajikistan) or institutional weakness (Kyrgyzstan). A comprehensive deradicalization policy requires taking into account cultural specifics, reforming the institution of religious education and strengthening trust in state and religious structures. Meanwhile, strict state control over the religious sphere, restrictions on freedom of religion, arbitrary arrests and bans on the activities of religious organizations contribute to the alienation of some believers from official institutions. This, in turn, forms underground religiosity, where radical interpretations gain legitimacy as a form of protest. In countries where religious institutions are integrated into the state apparatus (e.g. Kazakhstan and

Uzbekistan), there is a low level of trust in official Islam, which provokes a search for 'pure' sources of faith outside the country – often in the form of Salafi or jihadist teachings.

Radical movements exploit the identity crisis, especially among young people, offering a model of a complete Islamic identity that is opposed to the secular state and the 'corrupted' tradition that does not fit 'pure Islam'.

Central Asia is not isolated from global processes. Conflicts in the Middle East (Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan), the activities of terrorist organizations (ISIS, Al-Qaeda, Taliban), as well as the influence of online propaganda play a key role in radicalization.

Narratives of jihad, martyrdom, and the Islamic state are spread through social networks, YouTube, Telegram, and WhatsApp, often using local languages. Radical groups professionally adapt the content to regional specifics.

Thus, in 2020, the Center for Religious Studies of Kyrgyzstan conducted a study to analyze the meanings, ideas and values of violent extremism in Central Asia, which identified the following features:

- the information field of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan is influenced by the ideas of the same protagonists of Islam, while in the case of Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, local country content has a greater influence. In Kazakhstan, this is interethnic confrontation, in Kyrgyzstan - calls to ignore elections and fight against civil society institutions, in Tajikistan - calls to protect their fellow citizens in other countries, in Turkmenistan - calls to survive, and in Uzbekistan, the features of the country context are calls for immigration for religious reasons, justification for the need to destroy traditional family relationships.
- the messages of all extremist groups have a so-called common ideological focus and promote the ideas of purity of faith, helping fellow believers, fighting infidels and apostates, rejection of secular power and its decisions, the desire to create a caliphate and anti-Semitism [65].

5. Conclusions

Islamic identity in Kazakhstan and Central Asia is shaped by historical memory, state-ideological discourse, transnational Islamic flows and social changes. It is not a static category, but a complex, changeable and multiple system of self-perception. The future of Islamic identity in the region will depend on the ability of societies and states to maintain a balance between spiritual freedom, cultural identity and social unity.

A comparative analysis shows that Islamic identity in Central Asia is not a single phenomenon, but is developing in the context of local political, historical and cultural trajectories. Kazakhstan, unlike its neighbors, demonstrates a balance between the integration of Islam and the preservation of the secular nature of the state, which allows us to talk about the formation of a specific Kazakhstani model of religiosity: moderate, nationally colored, institutionally stable.

Thus, the structural agents of the formation of Islamic identity in Kazakhstan and Central Asia act in conditions of plurality, competition and

ideological polarity. These agents do not form a single identity, but a mosaic structure of religious self-consciousness in which official, traditional, and global discourses coexist and conflict. Understanding these processes is necessary for developing sustainable religious policies that can combine religious freedom, national security, and cultural identity.

In the context of the development of a secular state and a developing civil society in Kazakhstan and the Central Asian countries, it is important to study and objectively present the status of Islamic identity in the structure of public consciousness, to record the scale of its reproduction and the particular influence on both the socio-cultural context of life of various strata and groups in general and on the process of civil identity in particular. Thus, religiosity as a 'manifested' component of lifestyle and mentality becomes an important indicator by which it is possible not only to determine the content of cultural paradigms, but also to effectively influence mass and specialized consciousness. Under the influence of both external globalization and internal development trends, in recent decades, a clearly observable peculiar spiritual renaissance has been taking place in Kazakhstani society, which is associated with an increased interest in the phenomenon of religion, the emergence of new forms of religiosity, primarily non-confessional. The study of the state and trends of religiosity of the population of Kazakhstan, the problems of religious identity, the technology of extremization of consciousness and behavior of adherents in non-traditional religious organizations, the risks of loss of identity in new globalization strategies are caused by the intensification of the religious factor in Kazakhstan and throughout the region.

The future of Islamic identity in the region depends on the ability of society and the state to integrate religious tradition into the framework of the secular legal order, ensuring its inclusiveness, sustainability and ability to dialogue. The Hanafi model, based on rationality, moderation and tolerance, can serve as a stable basis for the further development of Islamic identity as part of cultural modernization.

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