RELIGION IN SOCIETY

THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS LITERACY IN COUNTERACTING NEW ISLAMIST MOVEMENTS IN KAZAKHSTAN

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A B S T R A C T

The paper focuses on the critical role of educational institutions in disseminating a sophisticating and historically grounded understanding religion among young people of post-Soviet Kazakhstan. In the context of plurality of opinions, worldviews as well as of cultural and religious products available on the today's global market-place, one can hardly expect any restrictive measures and bans imposed by the government to prevent Kazakh youth from getting exposed to non-systemic and alternative religious movements, including those with militant agendas. The rapid development of modern communication technologies today renders all kind of information readily available to the young generation of Kazakhs through virtual forums, blogs and chatrooms. Invisible and anonymous recruiters for various religious-political causes and religious cults exploit this fact to their advantage, using the legitimate grievances of young people that the state is unwilling or unable to address.

The situation in Kazakhstan is further aggravated by the fact that the majority of the population, especially its youth, has a very vague knowledge of their own religion, not to mention the religions that are not part of their personal background or family tradition. Under these circumstances, the issue of religious education requires close attention on behalf of both researchers and policy-makers. The authors see education as the key factor in immunizing young Kazakhs against religious extremism, close-mindedness, and religion- and ethnic-based intolerance and hatred.

KEYWORDS: *de-secularization, new religious movements, Kazakhstan, youth, religious literacy and education.*

I n t r o d u c t i o n

The 21st century brought about a drastic change in the spiritual and intellectual demands and inclinations of the world population. Contrary to the predictions current in the 1950-1960s, religion has not only survived the onslaught of secularism, but has become a major ideological and political factor in the life of many societies.[1] Thus, according to the statistics of Pew Research Center, more than eight-in-ten people of the globe identify themselves with a religious group. A comprehensive demographic study of more than 230 countries and territories conducted by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life estimates that there are 5.8 billion religiously affiliated adults and children around the globe, representing 84% of the world population of 6.9 billion.[2]

The rediscovery of religion by various social and demographic groups in the republics of the former Soviet Union is a fact that no one can deny. During the Soviet era, religious practices in the republics of the U.S.S.R. were performed officially in severely curtailed form and under a close supervision of the state security apparatus or clandestinely by some individuals and groups of the officially atheist Soviet societies. Against great odds, religiously committed individuals kept attending churches, mosques, places of worship, and could even manage to obtain religious education in the

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[1] See: *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. by P.B. Clarke, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2009, passim.

[2] See: Pew Research Center. The Global Religious Landscape, 18 December, 2012.

official religious colleges (*madrasa*s) of Central Asia or in semi-clandestine "study rooms" (*hudzhra*s: from the Arabic *hujra*, "room").[3] After the former Soviet republics of Central Asia became independent, their populations were eager to find new ideological and spiritual orientations, which they often rationalized as a rediscovery of their authentic religious roots. For former nominal "Soviet Muslims"[4] adopted Islamic religious slogans and eagerly displayed their newly found Muslim identity and piety by Islamic dress and language.[5] At the same time, in their personal and professional lives the overwhelming majority of the Soviet Muslims was still guided by secular rules and norms. This is hardly surprising, because their governments did not implement the policy of wholesale Islamization, fearing that it might backfire. Instead, they chose, at least in theory, to pursue the course of establishing a civil society based on secular constitutional principles.[6] In reality, civil freedoms were restricted in most Muslim republics of the former U.S.S.R. Regardless of the desires of the secular authorities of the newly intendent post-Soviet countries, the newly discovered religious sentiment and orientation of their subjects have become part of the social fabric of the newly independent states of the Central Asian region. From that time on, the Muslim revival has been closely monitored and controlled by the state apparatus.

In an attempt to conceptualize the religious turn in the trajectories of the former Muslim republics of the Soviet Union and elsewhere, Western sociologists have proposed that the contemporary postmodern and post-secular world is characterized by either an insidious or an overt de-secularization that promotes religion, while preserving secular elements and norms of social life in the public space. In particular, the researchers stress the shift in religious knowledge acquisition and distribution from centralized authoritative institutions to a personal self-discovery and quest for world-orientation that takes on a non-traditional religious form. Some sociologists consider this flight of the postmodern individual from institutionalized religions to be a vivid proof of de-secularization. Those who disagree with them, on the other hand, argue that this trend indicates a new dimension or twist of secularization in the modern world.[7] Be this as it may, the majority of modern sociologists and scholars of religion acknowledge that definitions of such concepts as "secularization," "de-secularization," and "post-secular" are fluid and open to an academic discussion. In other words, the academic community has no consensus regarding the content of these important notions, so everyone is using them as he or she sees fit.

For example, some researchers view what they call "post-secular epoch" not just as a simple, mechanical comeback of religion, but also as an era of new approaches to the evaluation and definition of the sacred by the Western academic establishment. There are also those who prefer to speak about a new "enchantment" of the world following Max Weber's famous concept of "re-sacralization." In the context of such debates, secularism itself may be seen a form of a hidden religion or quasi-religion, as Paul Tillich used to describe it. For example, Communism, Nazism, or liberalism could be identified in such terms.[8]

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[3] For details, see: *Allah's Kolkhozes: Migration, de-Stalinisation, Privatisation, and the New Muslim Congregations in the Soviet Realm (1950s-2000s)*, ed. by Stéphane A. Dudoignon, Christian Noack, Klaus Schwarz Verlag, Berlin, 2014.

[4] For illuminating discussions of this notion, see the volume quoted in the previous note and A. Bustanov, "Muslim Literature in the Atheist State," *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts*, No. 9, 2018, pp. 1-31; idem, "Against Leviathan: On the Ethics of Islamic Poetry in Soviet Russia," in: *The Piety of Learning: Islamic Studies in Honor of Stefan Reichmuth*, ed. by M. Kemper, R. Elger, Brill, Leiden and Boston, 2017, pp. 199-224.

[5] See: A. Knysh, "Islam and Arabic as the Rhetoric of Insurgency: The Case of the Caucasus Emirate," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 35, 2012, pp. 315-337.

[6] See: The Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, available at [http://mfa.gov.kz/en/hague/content-view/the-constitution-of-the-republic-of-kazakhstan].

[7] See: K. Dobbelaere, *Sekularyzacja. Trzy poziomy analizy,* tłum. R. Babińska, Nomos, Kraków, 2008, p. 147.

[8] See: R. Grzegorczykowa*,* "Co o fenomenie duchowości mówi język?" in: *Fenomen duchowości,* ed. by A. Grzegorczyk, J. Sójka, R. Koschany, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań, 2006, pp. 21-29; R. King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India, and "the Mystic East,"* Routledge, London and New York, 1999, pp. 8-14.

The predominantly secular political, social and cultural environment of contemporary nation states gives rise to religious pluralism. According to Peter L. Berger, modern lifestyles, ways of production and ideological orientations have become a catalyst for secularization and an engine of pluralism. In other words, religious pluralism is intimately and inextricably linked to the rapidly evolving process of globalization, which in turn is associated with secularization (regardless of the inevitable polysemy of this concept).[9]

In considering the vicissitudes of secularization in the Muslim post-Soviet republics, it is important to note that in this part of the world secularism usually took on the most rigid form of Marxist-Leninist atheism that denied religion any visible place in the public sphere. As mentioned, after the fall of the Soviet Union, the situation in these republics changed dramatically. Taking post-Soviet Kazakhstan as our case study, we observe a vigorous revival of the country's old religious traditions, such as Islam of the Hanafi legal and theological school (*madhhab*) and Russian Orthodox Christianity. At the same time, representatives of new religious movements, which we will loosely identify as "non-traditional" or "alternative," also made their way into the country to disseminate their teachings. Some did that actively and effectively, others less so. This process was taking place in the context of an intensive quest for identity by young Kazakh men and women in which, in accordance with the worldwide trends outlined above, religion has an important role to play. On the one hand, in the 1990s, religious belief and affiliation served as a major factor of self-assertion and socialization, inevitably contributing to the accentuation of a distinctive ethnoconfessional identity by members of various religious communities. On the other hand, the quest for religious not infrequently lead to the conversion of spiritual seekers to new religious communities.[10]

In Kazakhstan, the majority of the population, especially young people, has little or no knowledge of either their own religion (Islam), or of other religions. Heeding the advice of Kazakh academic scholars, the state authorities sought to address this religious illiteracy, because, in their view, it was intimately linked to the larger societal problems faced by the state, namely religious and ethnic intolerance and national security. This is not the place to discuss the downsides of "securitization of Islam" by post-Soviet state authorities.[11] Such discussions by well-meaning and liberally minded Western academics are important and timely, but have little or nothing to offer in terms of viable state policies. This is understandable, because the scholars who criticize the governments for being "authoritarian" or "inapt" have no hope of seeing their own policies (if they have any) being implanted and, therefore, can afford to be harsh, vocal and unforgiving in their condemnation of the Kazakh government and the country's academic establishment.

The Kazakh academics, on the other hand, have to address the problem of youth radicalization (which is quite real), whether they are prepared for this or not. By taking advantage of the funds provided by the government of Kazakhstan, they convened a series of international conferences and encouraging Kazakh and foreign academics to address the problem. Thus, the Al-Farabi Kazakh National University became a forum for discussing such burning issues of the day as "Religious Education in the Context of a Research University" (Almaty, 2017), "Religious Education in Modern Kazakhstan: Present and Future" (Almaty, 2014), and "The Role of Religion in Cultural and Socio-Political Developments in Kazakhstan: A Textbook as a Humanitarian Dialogue Project" (Almaty, 2015). In a similar vein, a group of scholars affiliated with the said university has published a collec-

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[9] See: P.L. Berger, "The Good of Religious Pluralism," *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life,* April 2016, p. 39. Peter L. Berger outlines four benefits of pluralism.

[10] See: Ye.Ye. Burova. "Novaya religioznost kak epifenomen i realnost," *Izvestia NAN RK,* Vol. 6, 2013, p. 45.

[11] J. Heathershaw, D.W. Montgomery, *The Myth of Post-Soviet Muslim Radicalization in the Central Asian Republics*, Russia and Eurasia Program, Chatham House, November 2014, available at [https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/field/field_document/2014-11-14%20Myth%20summary%20v2b.pdf].

tive monograph entitled *Religious Studies in Modern Kazakhstan: Ways of Formation and Development* (Almaty, 2014).

The present study is an attempt to summarize the results obtained in the course of these academic discussions. The authors submit that by educating Kazakhstan's young men and women in the viscidities of religions in various global contents the state is bound to achieve its goal of dissuading Kazakhstan's young men and women from joining Islamic groups with radical agendas that act in the name and on behalf of Islam.

The Religious Situation in Kazakhstan

Islam has been the main form of religious commitment in Kazakhstan since the fourteenth century CE. However, even before the Soviet campaign to eradicate religion, Islam was hardly the principal factor in the construction of Kazakh culture and identity.[12] Contemporary Kazakh scholars argue that the Kazakh tribes were syncretic in their religious beliefs and practices and freely combined pre-Islamic rituals with Muslim practices.[13] To what extent the two can be neatly separated is a different matter that should not detain us here.[14] For the moment, we assume that they have become closely, even inextricably intertwined.

Modern Kazakhstan is a territorially large and ethnically diverse state that includes many non-Kazakhs (mostly Russians and Ukrainians as well as Uzbeks, Koreans, Uyghurs, and Germans), whose families moved there on their own or were exiled during the Soviet period. According to the *Annual Report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom* (2017), about 65% of the country's residents are Muslims, mostly Sunni Hanafi; 25%—Orthodox Christians; less than 5% comprises Jews, Roman and Greek Catholics, various Protestant denominations and other religions.[15]

During Stalin's reign of terror, the Soviet government applied a relentless atheistic policy by discouraging or actively suppressing any manifestations of religious beliefs, practices and values in the public sphere.[16] Somewhat softer policies of managing religion were pursued under Stalin's successors[17]. After gaining independence in December 1991, Kazakhstan became a secular state officially. In practice, this means that the government regulates the activity of religious organizations and licenses religious groups. It also has the authority to declare certain religious traditions to be indigenous and orthodox, while branding others as pernicious and socially dangerous "cults."[18] Thus, An-

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[12] See, e.g.: W. Clark, "Networks of Faith in Kazakhstan," in: *Back Conversion After Socialism: Disruptions, Modernisms and Technologies of Faith in the Former Soviet Union*, ed. by M. Pelkmans, Berghahn Books, New York, 2009, pp. 129-142; for further details, see: B. Privratsky, *Muslim Turkestan: Kazakh Religion and Collective Memory,* Richmond, Curzon, Surrey, 2001. Chapter 1.

[13] See: S. Akatai, *Drevnie kulty i traditsionnaia kultura kazakhskogo naroda*, Kazakhskii NII kultury i iskusstvoznaniia, Almaty, 2001; R.M. Mustafina*, Islam i relikty doislamskikh mirovozzrencheskikh traditsii u kazakhov,* Zharkyn Ko, Astana, 2010.

[14] An attempt to unravel the complex relations between Islamic and pre-Islamic elements of the Kazakh identity has been undertaken by Bruce Privratsky in his *Muslim Turkistan*; see Chapters 2 and 3.

[15] See: Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook Kazakhstan*, available at [https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/kz.html], 5 January, 2018.

[16] See: A. Nurmanova, A. Izbairov, "Islamic Education in Soviet and Post-Soviet Kazakhstan," in: *Islamic Education in the Soviet Union and Its Successor States*, ed. by M. Kemper, R. Motika, St. Reichmuth, Routledge, New York, 2010, pp. 280-313.

[17] See: Ibidem.

[18] O. Roy, *Holy Ignorance: When Religion and Culture Part Ways,* Columbia University Press, New York, 2010, p. 160. Roy talks here about the government of Russia, however his statement can be extrapolated to Kazakhstan whose state policies in many ways mirror those of the Russian Federation.

drew Yarbrough[19] cogently argues that the primary concern of the government of Kazakhstan is politically motivated Islamic activity (Islamism), because state officials see it as a grave threat to the country's internal stability and international image. This conclusion finds support in John Anderson's theory that the issue of religion is inherently complex and ambivalent, especially for so-called transitional states, because religion can and frequently does become an alternative source of power and authority that is in a position to challenge the state's dominance in the ideological, social and political spheres.[20] The real or perceived danger of the religious challenge to the secular state lies in the ability of religious leaders to mobilize the masses for certain mundane goals in the name of higher, cosmic truths. Religion also helps its representatives to transcend and override localized loyalties and affiliations, rendering it a formidable social and political force. In the words of an Israeli expert on religious psychology (and in line with Hobsbawm's statement), "religion inspires cooperation among genetically unrelated individuals by invoking a new identity which is above that of a family or clan."[21] While nationalism or revolutionary secular ideas and ideals (e.g., communism, anarchism or socialism) have been doing the same thing over the past two centuries, they are often monopolized and utilized by the nation state (e.g., the post-colonial governments of North Africa, the Middle East and South Asia),[22] leaving religion as one of the few, if not the only, vents for popular discontents with the status quo. The state, predictably, responds to such religiously articulated challenges by branding them as manifestations of "pernicious foreign cults," "religious extremism" or "religious radicalism."[23] As an illustration, one can cite the speech of Kazakh president Nursultan Nazarbayev during the Youth Forum in Astana in 2014: "The more people hold on to radicalism, the less dynamics is there in the development of the state. The reason is simple. Radicalism does not benefit any sphere of life, but only hinders the progress. In the economy, it leads to unreasoned adventures and useless spending. The values and traditions that helped people to survive for many centuries are getting erased in [our] culture. The immunity of such a country becomes weaker, and it gets sick... The point is not about rejecting religion. During the years of independence 2,230 mosques, 186 Orthodox Christian churches, and 40 Catholic churches were built in Kazakhstan. Religious tolerance is an important part of our spiritual heritage. However, religion should always be kept separate from the state, and this is a rule of thumb for surviving in the 21st century."[24]

Noteworthy here is that, in addition to blaming radicalism for hindering social and economic progress, the president of Kazakhstan forcibly emphasizes a strict and uncompromising separation of

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[19] See: A. Yarbrough, *Islamist Challenge Authoritarian Response: Politics and Policies towards Islamism in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in the Post-Soviet Era*, Thesis for the Degree of Master of Arts, University of Washington, Seattle, 2014, p. 53, available at [https://digital.lib.washington.edu/researchworks/bitstream/handle/1773/26777/Yarbrough_washington_0250O_13191.pdf?sequence=1].

[20] See: J. Anderson, *Religious Liberty in Transitional Societies*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p. 216 (see also pp. 115-165).

[21] B. Beit-Halalhmi, "On Neither Burying Nor Praising Religion," *Critical Research on Religion*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2017, p. 211. This idea was formulated much earlier by Eric Hobsbawm who argued that "Religion is an ancient and well-tried method of establishing communion through common practice and a sort of brotherhood between people who otherwise have nothing much in common" (see his *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, p. 68).

[22] For some concrete examples, see: A. Knysh, *Islam in Historical Perspective*, 2nd ed., Routledge, Abington, Oxon, New York, 2017, Chapters 22-24.

[23] For a justification of war on ["Islamic"] terror disguised as an academic study, see: R. Emanuilov., A Yashlavsky, *Terror in the Name of Faith: Religion and Political Violence*, Academic Studies Press, Boston, 2011; for an analysis of the use of the notion of "Islamic extremism" to suppress opposition to the state and its policies, see: A. Knysh, "A Clear and Present Danger: 'Wahhabism' as a Rhetorical Foil," *Die Welt des Islams*, Vol. 44, No. 1, 2004, p. 3-26.

[24] See: N.A. Nazarbayev, *Address of the President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev at the Youth Forum "Towards New Victories Led by the Leader of the Nation!"*, available in Russian at [http://www.akorda.kz/ru/speeches/internal_political_affairs/in_speeches_and_addresses/vystuplenie-prezidenta-kazahstana-nnazarbaeva-na-forume-molodezhi-s-liderom-nacii-k-novym-pobedam].

religion and the state—an ideological stance that is vividly reminiscent of Turkish Kamalism and its variations in other Islamic regions.[25] Yet, paradoxically, his words also inadvertently reveal the role of the state in sponsoring the construction of religious buildings, because, as everyone in Kazakhstan and beyond knows well, only the Kazakh state and some carefully vetted foreign donors, have the license and means to implement such expensive projects.

The president's concerns regarding [Islamic] radicalism are understandable in the light of the perpetual instability in Afghanistan that has had a considerable negative effect on regional security in Central Asia, especially in the aftermath of the events of 11 September, 2001 in the U.S. Faced with non-state actors operating under Islamic slogans and in the name of Islam, the five states of the region—Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan—eagerly joined the U.S. and NATO's "war on terrorism" declared by President George W. Bush in 2001.[26] This military-political alliance has been described, justified or even praised by experts on "security studies" in a host of publications that are too numerous to be listed here.[27] The most successful and high profile Islam-based movements such as Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) have received the lion's share of academic attention.[28] The overall list of the Islamic religious organizations banned by the Kazakh government includes the following: the IMU, Hizb-ut-Tahrir al-Islami (HT), Jamaat of Central Asian Mujahedin, Islamic Party of Eastern Turkestan, Kurdistan Workers' Party (Turkey and Iraq), Boz Kurt (Turkey and East Turkestan), Lashkar-e-Toiba (Pakistan), Social Reforms Society (Kuwait), Asbat-an-Asar (Israel), al-Qa'eda, Taliban (Afghanistan-Pakistan), and the Muslim Brotherhood (Egypt).[29]

Why and How Do Alternative Religious Groups Attract the Young?

The majority of Kazakh observers of non-traditional or alternative movements seems to agree that the Internet has become the major recruitment tool for various oppositional Islamic groups worldwide and their aficionados and imitators across the globe. In the opinion of these observers, the Internet enables leaders and recruiters to address large audiences, while remaining anonymous and undetectable by state security apparatuses.[30] High transmission and communication speed, low costs, and various multimedia capabilities facilitate the virtual presence and public outreach of non-traditional Islamic organizations. Various groups acting on behalf of Islam use modern information technologies

[25] See: B. Sayyid, _A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism_, Zed Books, London and New York, 1997, pp. 52-83.

[26] See: E. Karagiannis, _The New Political Islam: Human rights, Democracy, and Justice_, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2017, p. 184.

[27] See, e.g.: D. Chaudet, "Hizb ut-Tahrir: An Islamist Threat to Central Asia?" _Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs,_ Vol. 26, Issue 1, 2006, pp. 113-125; A. Tabyshalieva, "Hizb-ut-Tahrir's Increasing Activity in Central Asia," _Central Asian-Caucasus Analyst_, 14 January, 2004, available at [http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/8656]; for a book-length study of Hizb ut-Tahrir, see: E. Karagiannis, _Political Islam in Central Asia: The Challenge of Hizb ut-Tahrir_, Routledge, London and New York, 2010.

[28] For details, see: M.B. Olcott, _In the Whirlwind of Jihad_. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, D.C., 2011; Zh. Baizakova, R. McDermott, _Reassessing the Barriers to Islamic Radicalization in Kazakhstan_, Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, Carlisle, PA, 2015.

[29] See: A. Nurmanova, A. Izbairov, "Islamic Education in Soviet and Post-Soviet Kazakhstan," in: _Islamic Education in the Soviet Union and Its Successor State,_ Routledge, New York, 2010, p. 294.

[30] See: _Religioznye konversii v postsekuliarnom obshchestve (opyt fenomenologicheskoi rekonstruktsii)_, Collective monograph, ed. by A.Kh. Bizhanov, Institute of Philosophy, Political Science and Religion Studies, Almaty, 2017, pp. 344-348.

and online blogs not just to recruit young people and advance their political, social and intellectual agendas, but also to detect potential supporters and sponsors, thus turning the Internet into an effective fundraising tool.[31] The number of sites containing propaganda materials of various alternative Islamic groups and movements is steadily growing, while the rapid development of sophisticated mobile applications facilitates downloading their literature on mobile phones.

This said, in the final account, the Internet is nothing but a medium, one of many possible ways to disseminate or advertise certain Islamic ideas, e.g., those advocating social and economic equity and those that portray Islam as the religion of justice par excellence.[32] Before the Internet, there were audiotapes, and before them religious pamphlets and newspapers. However, it is the ideas and their reception by intended audiences that matter, not the channels through which they are broadcast.[33] In other words, the Internet is not the cause; it is but a medium and facilitator.

What follows are the conditions and circumstances that, according to Kazakh experts, facilitate the recruitment activity of alternative Islamic movements in Kazakhstan:

— The absence of the consistent and unambiguous state policy on religion.

— A lack of correct and positive coverage in the media, educational courses, and Internet resources—especially those directed at young people—of the questions about religious and secular spirituality.

— The absence of quick solutions of social and economic problems, e.g., unemployment, poverty, marginalization.

— The delay in spreading religious literacy among targeted audiences and the population at large.

— The absence of some religious organization in the prohibition list.

— Internet influence[34].

To infuse some theory into our discussion, many Western scholars believe that those who join radical groups are marginalized, poor, and antisocial people who want to compensate their deprivation and economic needs through emotional and social rewards by participating in highly organized groups that consider themselves the elect. In other words, radicals are more often than not people who are socially and psychologically vulnerable.[35]

Lorne Dawson disagrees.[36] He advances the theory of relative deprivation, according to which economic deprivation is not the main reason why people turn to radical religious groups. Dawson then argues that it is difficult to determine who will eventually join new religious movements, including ones preaching violence. He concedes, however, that converts to new religious movements are more likely to have fewer and weaker social ties. In other words, people with fewer social attachments have lower stakes in conformity and therefore are more readily available for recruitment to groups that are in high tension or philosophical conflict with society.[37] They are usually individuals "who are looking for something," for example, a new religious commitment that provides ready-made answers to their existential questions. Such converts indeed have weak social and ideological connections. Therefore,

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[31] For concrete examples of the use of the Internet by Kazakh young men and women to find information about Islam, see: Ibid., 169-171, 179, 186, 211, 238, 340-341.

[32] See: E. Karagiannis, *The New Political Islam*, p. 182.

[33] See: F. Burgat, *Comprendre l'islam politique*, La Découverte, Paris, 2017, pp. 267-268.

[34] See: *Religioznye konversii v postsekuliarnom obshchestve (opyt fenomenologicheskoi rekonstruktsii)*, p. 431.

[35] See: R. Barrett, *Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees*. The Soufan Center, 2017, p. 41.

[36] See: L. Dawson, "The Study of New Religious Movements and the Radicalization of Home-Grown Terrorists: Opening a Dialogue," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 22, Issue 1, 2009, pp. 1-21.

[37] See: Ibid., p. 6.

many relatively well-off young people join radical organizations, simply because they can afford to experiment with alternative ways of living and believing.

Such findings generally agree with the situation in Kazakhstan, where single individuals or individuals "looking for something" as well as those who have been victims to psychological and social traumas of various kinds become the easiest targets for recruitment into alternative religious organizations and cults. Such people do not have a strong attachment to their homeland, have nothing to lose, and they may even be on the lookout for escape from their homeland. For example, some young Kazakhs joined the Islamic State (ISIS). In 2017, their number was officially estimated to be 127, including women and children.[38]

C o n c l u s i o n

Summarizing our findings, we would like to emphasize the importance of education in immunizing Kazakhstan's youth against "catching the bug" of religious extremism, close-mindedness, and intolerance. In the context of an astounding plurality of opinions, world-views, cultural and religious products on the today's global market place, one can hardly expect any restrictive measure and bans imposed by the government to prevent Kazakh youth from getting exposed to alternative or non-traditional religious movements, including those with radical and militant agendas. The rapid development of modern communication technologies allows the young generation of Kazakhs to expand their intellectual horizons by navigating the cyberspace. Here they are likely to meet recruiters for various religious causes and cults. The recruiters with militant religious and political agendas astutely use the legitimate grievances of young people that the state is unwilling or unable to address in order to persuade them to join their ranks. In the case of Islamic (Islamist) movements, global and local agendas seamlessly merge: the grievances of the worldwide Muslim *umma* are universal, but present in every local Muslim community in an always unique or specific way. This situation creates the phenomenon of "glocalization" that sustains such movements despite repression by secular and occasionally also not-so-secular states.[39] The recent, albeit short-lived successes of al-Qaʻeda and the Islamic State in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Somalia and West Africa, are evidence of continual vitality and attractiveness of such movement to young Muslim men and women living both in the East and in the West.

When we started to write this article, we aimed to demonstrate that educating Kazakh youth about religion in historical and comparative perspective would prevent them from joining "foreign" movements acting in the name and behalf of Islam. We have discovered that these movements are not so "alien" to Kazakh society, after all. There are purely local factors and grievances that feed them. Given the fact that religion has become a major element of the new Kazakh identity, especially among young people, they should be encouraged to ponder its implications for their personal lives. It is not enough to teach them about the Hanafi Islam of their ancestors. We need also to show them that Islam has a long history and offers a wide variety of interpretations and role models to identify oneself with. To this end, we, the educators, should prepare a coherent curriculum and a series of well-written textbooks based on an up-to-date research in the field of Islamic studies. We should design these educational tools in such a way as to highlight the plurality and polyphony of Islam as an intellectual tradition and devotional practice with wide-ranging political, social and cultural ramifications. No less importantly, the instructional materials should not focus exclusively on Muslim phenomena, but also expose learners to similar or parallel developments and concepts in other religious traditions.

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[38] See: R. Barrett, op. cit., p. 12.

[39] For details, see: E. Karagiannis, *The New Political Islam*. The author uses the concept of "glocalization" to analyze the recent evolution of the movements acting in the name and on behalf of Islam and the *umma*.

This approach will help to remove the aura of exclusivity from Islam, giving it its due place in the gallery of universal religious traditions.

The second goal is much more challenging and difficult to achieve. It lies in encouraging young men and women to think critically about the facts and statements with which they are being bombarded on a daily basis due to the global outreach of information technologies. Sifting through information flows, discerning facts from fiction and tracing certain statements and theories back to their ideological origins are skills that every educated person should possess nowadays. Barring this, young men or women will inevitably fall victim to illusions, carefully constructed and disseminated myths and utopias and, worse still, to manipulation by various actors and "agents of influence," as they are often dubbed in official and unofficial discourses today. Concrete ways of devising and implementing these educational tools and strategies are a collective task to be undertaken by the Kazakh state and its intellectuals (educators). They lie outside the purview of this article.

To conclude our discussion of the religious situation in Kazakhstan, we would like to share several insights that we have acquired in the course of the present study. First, we should be realistic about the goals outlined above. The state cannot turn the situation around overnight, as some Western critics seem to propose. Theirs' is but wishful thinking, a well-meaning academic pipe dream of sorts. The most the current Kazakh state can do is to alleviate at least the most urgent grievances that push young men and women to embrace radical religious and political agendas advertised by certain Islamic groups and movements. In practice, this means reducing the level of corruption among state officials and creating well-paid jobs for the young. As for their moral-ethical wellbeing, one should remember that inculcating critical thinking in the population is not a panacea, but, in fact, a double-edged sword in that it can easily turn against real or perceived misdeeds and injustices of the state or its individual representatives. On the positive side, a critically minded and enlightened youth may remain dissatisfied with the incumbent government and its policies, but, at the same time, perhaps be more realistic and sophisticated regarding ways and means of challenging or changing them. It other words, a better-informed and educated young generation will be more constructive than disruptive. As for the state itself, its officials, too, need to be educated in ways of determining which religious movements are relatively benign and should be allowed to exist[40] and which indeed constitute a danger to state security and public order. A zero sum game is not the solution, because it results in totalitarianism—an outdated way of building and managing a nation today. A more accommodating, open-minded approach can only be implemented by the states whose leaders are ready to relinquish their political, cultural and ideological monopoly and allow other players to enter these fields of human endeavor. In short, the simultaneous education of the state authorities and the citizenry seems to be the only guarantee of the success of the project that we call "Kazakh society."

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[40] Thus, according to Emmanuel Kargiannis, a life-long student of Hizb ut-Tahrir, this and other Islamic movements (such as, e.g., apolitical, inward oriented variants of Salafism) "are examples of non-violent Islamist activism" that secular states should learn to tolerate (E. Karagiannis, *The New Political Islam*, p. 185).