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Islam in Kazakhstan: a survey of contemporary trends and sources of securitization

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This essay examines the nature of Islam in Kazakhstan and its role in contemporary Kazakh society and politics. It highlights the unique place of Islam in the social and individual experiences of Kazakhs who see Islamic religion as a 'way of life', and illuminates several interrelated qualities of the Kazakh religion, such as a strong association of religious identity with ethnic identity of Kazakhs, interpenetration of religious canons with indigenous traditions and a growing tendency toward 'individualization' and 'intimization' of Islam. Another goal of the paper is to shed light on the worrisome process of the securitization of Islam. The latter phenomenon refers to a discursive practice of presenting Islam as a threat to Kazakhstan despite the prevalence of 'moderate' and apolitical manifestations of Islam in the republic. The study documents political interests surrounding securitization of Islam and the context which made the invocation of security in relation to Islam possible.

Keywords: Islam; Kazakhstan; securitization; security

Islam is a major religion of the republic of Kazakhstan. Its status is attested through the presence of a large Islamic following and recognition of the important place of Islamic faith in the history and culture of the Kazakh people. According to different estimates, Muslims constitute 52–65% of all believers in Kazakhstan (Trofimov 2001, Telebaev 2003). The majority of those identifying with Islam are rather light observers of Islamic laws and prohibitions. Many Kazakh Muslims do not fulfil the duties associated with canonical Islam. The 'Muslimness' of Kazakhs is commonly defined through their participation in an array of life-cycle rituals, adherence to values and social mores of the Kazakh communities, and celebration of communal traditions.

Despite the prevalence of 'heterodox' forms of Islam in Kazakhstan developed as a result of a prolonged and uneven process of Islamicization of local traditions and localization of scriptural Islam, a worrisome phenomenon of securitization has evolved in recent years. This process involves the merging of the official discourse on Islam and security and discursive framing of Islam as a threat to Kazakhstan.

What is the role of Islam in contemporary Kazakhstan's society and politics? What explains the securitization of Islam? This study engages with these questions. Much of what has been said and written about Islam in Central Asia and Kazakhstan has concentrated on radical Islamic movements and assessments of the level of threat that radical Islam poses to the stability of Central Asian states. Undeniably, this is an important topic. It is equally important, however, to examine more prevalent forms of Islamic observance and practice, which constitute the 'way of life' of Kazakhs, and inquire into the roots of a dangerous discursive process whereby certain manifestations of Islam are defined as threats to security.

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Kazakhstan presents an interesting case for the study of Islam in post-Communist societies and politics. It has seen relatively lower levels of radical Islamic movements, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, compared to other Central Asian republics. The Kazakh authorities have denied the existence of home-grown terrorists and religious extremists, and there have been very few reports concerning activities of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in the country (Omelicheva 2011). However, the Kazakh leadership chose to securitize Islam and respond to the alleged threat with disproportionally harsh responses. The goal of this essay, then, is to take stock of the multifaceted forms of Islamic observance and practice in Kazakhstan and illuminate domestic and international factors affecting official perceptions of Islam and religious policies.

The paper proceeds in three sections. First, I take up the challenge of describing the nature of Islam in Kazakhstan and its role in the social and individual experiences of the Kazakh people. I point out several defining and interrelated qualities of the Islamic faith of Kazakhs, particularly, a strong association of ethnic and religious identities, contextualization or 'folklorization' of Islam, and a growing tendency toward 'individualization' and 'intimization' of religion.

Section two describes the phenomenon of the securitization of Islam. Securitization denotes a discursive practice of defining a phenomenon that does not necessarily belong to a security realm as a security threat. The discussion of the securitization of Islam will be followed by the explanation of securitization using the conceptual lens of the Copenhagen School of security studies in section three. According to this school, securitization is a historically contingent product of the competition for power and access to resources between different political interests within the state and among states. The framework of securitization calls for identifying those actors who may benefit from the discourse of Islamic danger. I, therefore, review political interests surrounding securitization of Islam in Kazakhstan, and the context that made the invocation of security in relation to Islam possible.

Located at the crossroads of several disciplines – religious studies, political science and sociology – this study relies on a diverse toolkit of methods. It provides a critical meta-analysis of the substantial literature documenting anthropological, historical and ethnographic research on Islam in Central Asia and Kazakhstan, supported by evidence collected during the author's field research in the country, as well as systematic content analysis of political discourse concerning Islam in Kazakhstan.

Islam in contemporary Kazakh society

Like other Central Asian republics, Kazakhstan is a predominantly Muslim society. However, the size of its Islamic following is smaller due to the presence of a significant Slavic minority, mainly Russians, but also Ukrainians and Byelorussians. Because the non-titular nationalities are largely concentrated in certain geographical areas and cities of Kazakhstan, there are important regional differences in the size of Islamic communities across the country. Islamic religion is more widespread in the southern and western regions of Kazakhstan. In the north and east of the country, fewer people identify with the Islamic religion.

During the 1990s, Kazakhstan experienced a revival of Islamic faith. There has been a marked increase in the number of people practising Islam as well as places for worship since the republic's independence in 1991. If in 1989 there were only 46 mosque congregations in Kazakhstan, by 1998 their number expanded to more than 1000. According to a national reference book, Kazakhstan had 1652 registered Muslim associations in 2003, and their volume continued to grow (Dzhalalov 2006, p. 74). Despite the resurgence of interest in Islam, the degree of religious observance in the strict sense of the word (for instance, the performance of five duties incumbent on every Muslim) has been rather low (Telebaev 2003).

For historical reasons, Islam has become inseparable from the traditional life course of the Kazakhs and from the community in which these traditions prevail. It has evolved into what some scholars termed the local contextualization of Islam (Privratsky 2001, p. 15). The Islamicization of Central Asia began in the seventh century, but the steppe territory populated with nomadic tribes did not provide a fertile ground for the spread of canonical Islam which is more prevalent among sedentary populations. The latter is a religion of settled people. It requires developed urban infrastructure for disseminating scriptural knowledge through madrasas. The nomadic culture was resistant to any form of theocracy or strict practices of canonical Islam. According to Khalid (2007, p. 33): 'Power in nomadic societies was imagined in genealogical terms, and to the extent that state structures existed they derived their moral authority from *âdat*, tribal custom and the traditions of the elders (who were Muslims by definition), rather than through the juridical tradition of the *shariat* as it was developed in urban societies by generations of ulama.'

Most of the Kazakhs were converted to the Sunni branch of Islam by the end of nineteenth century. However, even after adopting a new faith, the nomads continued to rely on their own socio-cultural values and *âdat*, combining their pre-Islamic religious traditions with the precepts of Islam (Klyashtorny and Sultanov 1992, p. 150). The policies of Tsarist and Soviet Russia only reinforced the blending of indigenous worldviews with Islam. In nomadic societies, where Islamic faith was viewed as a small component in the mosaic of local traditions, the Russian state exhibited a rather lenient approach to Islam. The Bolsheviks, initially, nearly decimated the main bastions of Islam in Central Asia and elsewhere in Russia. Still, many features of pre-1917 Islam survived the Soviet assault. Toward the end of the Second World War the Stalin regime had softened its stance on religion allowing for the establishment of the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan in 1943. As part and parcel of its nationality politics, the Soviet government permitted religious observance and education in the post-Second World War USSR. One of the consequences of this policy was strengthening the tie between ethnic and religious identification. The Muslim identity of the Kazakhs was blended with their national identity. The traditional practices of Kazakh Muslims became linked with the Soviet notion of culture, whereas their religious identification became an aspect of their national cultural heritage. The more public and 'more religious' forms of Muslim spiritual life (according to Soviet logic), such as ritual worships in mosques, were perceived as 'bad' and 'extreme', and dissociated from the way in which Kazakhs defined their Muslimness (McBrien 2006, p. 344).

During the Soviet era, those religious practices that existed outside the sanctioned sphere of the government-controlled spiritual directorates were designated as 'parallel' Islam and were considered as illegal by the Soviet authorities (Privratsky 2001, p. 9, Louw 2007, p. 4). In modern scholarship, these labels have found expression in a popular dichotomy of scriptural and 'popular' Islam, or 'great' and 'little' Islamic traditions. After independence, the Kazakh authorities have appropriated the Soviet-era labels of 'official' and 'unofficial' Islam. They have also seized the idea of the 'little' tradition as part of the greater ethnic idea (Jessa 2006b).

There have been legitimate criticisms of these simplistic descriptions of Islam in Kazakhstan, which trivialize the depth and complexity of the Kazakh religion, and diminish its significance as less than 'real'. The local religious practices of Kazakhs penetrate the 'official' space of mosques, making the 'official' and 'parallel' dichotomy unfitting (Privratsky 2001). The label of 'unofficial' Islam, which the Soviet government used in reference to Sufism, has changed its meaning and is now deployed in relation to the alleged threat of religious 'extremism' and 'fundamentalism'. Sufism, itself, does not represent an opposition to the governing regimes. Neither does it fit into the 'folk Islam' category since some leading Sufi figures hold official oppositions in the Kazakh muftiate (Jessa 2006b, p. 177). Instead of adopting any simplistic dichotomy or

label for describing Islam in Kazakhstan, I lay out several defining and interrelated qualities of the Kazakh religion with an important caveat that those features of Islam in post-Soviet Kazakhstan are neither static nor internally homogenous.

Being Kazakh is being Muslim: ethnic and religious identification

One of the defining qualities of Islam in Kazakhstan is its association with ethnic identity and national traditions rather than Islamic theory and praxis (Hann and Pelkmans 2009, p. 1524). For Kazakhs, ethnic identity is a Muslim one; being Kazakh means being Muslim. This correspondence of ethnic and religious identification developed long before the expansion of the Russian empire into the steppe. Prior to the Russian conquest, large segments of the Central Asian population identified themselves as Muslims, but this religious marker had little to do with the strict Islamic observance or mastery of Quran and *shariat*. Instead, being Muslim signified belonging to a community that perceived itself as Muslim (Khalid 2007, p. 21). The latter claimed its Muslim identity through elaborate legends of origin narrating the beginnings of a community and describing the act of founding as well as the evolution of the community by interlacing elements of Islamic tradition and local norms. One of the most popular myths of origin was that of Baba Tükles. In popular memory, he is associated with the role of an Islamic progenitor, who brought the new religion to the Golden Horde by converting its Genghisid ruler to Islam (DeWeese 1994). At various stages of the development of the tale, Baba Tükles was presented as both the 'Islamizer' and a founder of the nation (DeWeese 1994, p. 6).

The Soviet-era nationality policies strengthened this religious and national identification. By the late Soviet period Muslim identity came to be understood and promoted as an intrinsic part of the Kazakh nationality. The correspondence of ethnic and religious identities has been sustained in the post-Soviet context as well. Most Kazakhs do not regard scriptural knowledge and the practice of the five pillars as the exclusive markers of Muslim identity. Instead, there is a widespread belief that having been born Muslim or being a descendant of communities where Islam constituted a central component of life are appropriate indicators of the Muslimness of Kazakhs (Ro'i and Wainer 2009, p. 306).

Being local is being traditional: 'folklorization' of Islam

The Soviet encoding of religious identities through nationality policies was an important factor in fostering and sustaining 'folklorized' forms of Islam (Hann and Pelkmans 2009, p. 1524). In the post-Soviet context, the Kazakh religion has retained a degree of 'folkorization' and an enduring impact of local indigenous traditions on Islam. Islam in Kazakhstan is traditional, but not in a sense of being 'scriptural', 'essentialist', and 'orthodox'. Rather, it is traditional because religious practices and discourse of Kazakhs have been attuned to their indigenous values and pre-Islamic traditions. What is presented as religious recasts and reinforces deeply internalized communal values, practices and beliefs. To borrow Privratsky's terminology, Kazakh religion is a 'local' contextualization of Islam. However, it is this local way of knowing and practising Islam, rather than juridical Islam, that is traditional (Privratsky 2001, p. 238).

Some of the expressions of this Islamic tradition are the cults of saints and holy places. These rituals go back centuries to the time when institutionalized religious practices were practically non-existent in the nomadic societies, which defined their Muslim identity by paying allegiance to individuals with sacred lineages (Khalid 2007, p. 33). In contemporary Kazakhstan, saints – individuals who are trusted as intermediaries between ordinary believers and God – act as the guardians of the traditional way of communal life. The tombs of these individuals became holy

places of pilgrimage and shrines, which continue to shape and define the Muslim identity of Kazakh communities. The communal identity, in turn, is made evident through the communal celebration of annual holidays, performance of life-cycle rituals, and the cult of ancestors (Khalid 2007, p. 22). In this way, values, traditions, social mores and ethics of the community became 'Muslim' in their own right. This is how an array of household-based life-cycle rituals, such as those marking the birth of a child, circumcision, marriage, funerals and others, also became Islamic (Abashin 2006, p. 272). This reciprocal process of indigenization of Islam and Islamicization of local customs and traditions led Kazakh communities and individual Kazakhs see themselves as 'naturally' Muslims (DeWeese 1994, p. 51, Khalid 2007, p. 22).

Being religious is having an intimate and individual experience of God: 'intimization' and 'individualization' of Islam

Another contemporary trend characterizing Islam in Kazakhstan is its growing 'individualization' manifested in the search for more personalized ways of practising the faith and its diversification (Peyrouse 2007). Placing emphasis on personal ethics and personal fulfilment as well as having private beliefs in God and searching for true meaning of life follows naturally from a conception of Muslimness in Kazakhstan as a way of life, rather than strict adherence to Islamic laws and prohibitions. It is also a reminder of a historically important relationship of the Kazakhs with the Sufi tradition, particularly its illuminationist dimension of 'personal revelation' (Privratsky 2001, p. 16).[1] In contemporary Kazakhstan, it is sustained through some elemental expressions, such as visionary experiences and dreams. The interpretations of these visionary experiences lead to healing practices and other kinds of religious behaviour in households and at the holy places (Jessa 2006a, p. 359). It is also manifested in the growing popularity of religious groups that promise spiritual healing and individual prosperity in Kazakhstan.

One of these groups, known as Aq Jol, or 'Pure Way' is illustrative of the growing popularity of this kind of religious movements. Founded in 1997 after one of the movement's organizers experienced an 'initiatory dream' calling for commitment to spiritual and healing work, Aq Jol focuses on the spiritual purification, healing, and education of people as foundational elements of their 'Pure Way' (Jessa 2006a).

The movement integrates tradition with scriptural Islam enriched and augmented through incorporation and assimilation of Islamic practices with indigenous rituals. The majority of Aq Jol members and healers characterize themselves as Muslim, but the movement is open to people from different denominations (Jessa 2006a, 2006b).

'Foreign' Islam

After independence, Central Asia saw an influx of foreign Muslim missionaries and religious groups arriving from Turkey, Pakistan and the Arab states. Although Uzbekistan and Tajikistan attracted the bulk of Muslim activists from abroad, Kazakhstan, too, has seen its share of foreign religious movements. Muslim missionaries have rarely been greeted with enthusiasm in Kazakhstan. Ordinary Muslims perceive foreign teachings and practices as manifestly intolerant and incompatible with the local Islamic tradition. Nevertheless, the dwindling authority of the official religious institutions and effective methods of propaganda employed by Muslim activists created a window of opportunity for a variety of foreign religious organizations.

The Nurcu and Fetullah Gülen movements have the strongest presence in Kazakhstan. With their origin in Turkey, they unite devout followers of the teachings of Said'Nursi and Fetullah Gülen. The Nurcu movement's mission in Central Asia is to assist the people in their personal journey of rediscovery of Islam. The underlying idea is that the revival of faith in society is only

possible through the resumption of individual faith, and the latter can be achieved through modern education. Fetullah Gülen, who can be seen as an offshoot of the general Nurcu movement, shares the movement's commitment to education and believes in the compatibility of modernity with Islam (Balci 2003, p. 151). The Nurcu and Fetullah Gülen groups have been engaging with the Central Asian youth, particularly through the Turkish Lyceums established in all Central Asian republics (with the exception of Uzbekistan where the schools were shut down). The educational curriculum of the Nurcu schools includes sciences and a variety of modern disciplines, but also subjects and elements of the classical Islamic school system. The Nurcu movement has also opened hundreds of businesses in Central Asia and launched the publication of its newspaper, *Zaman*.

Despite the establishment of dozens of schools and companies in Kazakhstan, the Nurcu movement still has a very weak support base among the Kazakhs. The Turkish schools have been facing resentment by the locals for being elitist. The movement's religious ideas have been perceived as inimical to local Islamic tradition. Turkish Nurcus are pious Muslims who are more devout than Kazakhs. Instead of accepting their moderate Islamic views, Nurcus typically impose on the Kazakhs their own more purist form of Islam, in this way creating a rift with the Kazakh Muslims. The Central Asian governments have also been suspicious of the group, and this explains why the Nurcu movement has never officially and openly stated its religious identity.

Along with more devout, but not necessarily 'political' forms of Islam, 'radical' Islamic groups have made inroads into the communities of Muslims in Central Asia. Hizb ut-Tahrir, for example, a radical Islamic group with a significant and growing presence in Central Asia, has been reported in Kazakhstan. The group pursues a pan-Islamic goal of establishing a global Caliphate ruled by *sharia*, but contrary to other jihadist movements, it eschews violence as a means toward accomplishing this goal. The first reports about activities of Hizb ut-Tahrir in the south of Kazakhstan appeared in the early 2000s. There, observers estimated the movement's membership in the low hundreds. The most recent publications of the Kazakh security services allege unprecedented growth in the rank-and-file of this group. The success of the recruiting efforts of Hizb ut-Tahrir has been attributed to its organizational structure, ideology and political situation in Central Asia. The Kazakh authorities have recently announced the presence of another radical group, the Tablighi Jammat, in Kazakhstan. It is a moderate Salafi movement, which works toward spiritual awakening of the Muslims of Central Asia. The more radical Salafi movements, with jihad as part of their platform, have not materialized in Kazakhstan to the same extent they have existed in the neighbouring republics of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Tablighi Jammat, the Nurcu movement, and other groups practising their faith outside of state-sponsored religious institutions are either regarded as pseudo-Muslim by the Muslim Spiritual Administration of Kazakhstan (DUMK) or designated as terrorist and extremist by the Kazakh government (Asanbaev 2006). The DUMK is the organization that leads the Kazakh Muslims adhering to the Hanafi *madhab*, i.e., a Muslim school of law. This is the only official *madhab* in the republic. The DUMK is envisioned as an independent intermediary between the state authorities and the congregation, but in practice it is an arm of the state, keeping a watchful eye on the Muslim population through the supervision of mosques' personnel, rotation of imams and other forms of control (International Crisis Group 2003, p. 31). The DUMK, however, does not and cannot control all Islamic organizations and associations in Kazakhstan. There are many mosques, particularly in the southern part of Kazakhstan, that are not subordinated to the DUMK. There are also local mosques in the countryside that remain unregistered with the Ministry of Justice. Therefore, they also escape the supervision of the DUMK. According to experts' estimates, the numbers of non-registered mosque

congregations, which hold the DUMK in very low regard and defy its command, is one and a half to two times greater than the scores of the registered mosques (Asanbaev 2006).

Securitization of Islam in Kazakhstan

As discussed in the previous section, Islam occupies a unique place in the hearts, minds and lives of the Kazakhs, for whom Islamic faith is a way of life. Being Muslim is part and parcel of being Kazakh. Despite the 'moderate' and largely apolitical manifestations of Islam in Kazakhstan, the official discourse in the republic has recently moved to present some forms of Islam as a threat to the stability and security of the nation. These varieties of Islam have not been clearly defined by the government of Kazakhstan but they are typically associated with practices of the religious communities unrecognized by the DUMK. The phenomenon of presenting something as a threat in official discourse has been termed 'securitization' of Islam. Originating in the Copenhagen School of security studies, the notion of securitization refers to 'the discursive process through which an intersubjective understanding is constructed within a political community to treat something as an existential threat'. To put it differently, security and insecurity are not objective facts but social constructs that are written and talked into existence (Huysmans 2006, p. 7). By invoking 'security' in connection with certain issues, such as diversity within Islam, policy makers frame a particular phenomenon as a security problem (Wæver 1995, p. 55). When a phenomenon is securitized, that is, defined as belonging to a domain of security, policy makers can claim a right to apply 'urgent and exceptional' measures that fall outside of the typical political processes to deal with the threat (Buzan and Wæver 2003, p. 491).

The process of securitization of Islam in Kazakhstan began at the turn of the century, when the country's leadership, security experts and representatives of main religious confessions began embracing the rhetoric of Islamic danger. In the 1990s, the Kazakh government exhibited confidence in the republic's invulnerability to Islamist threats. The public authorities contended that their country provided a poor soil for religious radicalization. In the 2000s, the discourse has noticeably changed. The Kazakh government declared radical Islam as the real threat to the state (Omelicheva 2011). The Kazakh leadership has become increasingly insecure about the republic's burgeoning religious sector. Various humanitarian and missionary groups have been suspected as cover-ups for radical Islamic groups. It has become common to hear a viewpoint that in Kazakhstan, too, there are certain conditions and factors that might become the precursors for politically motivated religious violence (Kurganskaia 2002).

President Nazarbayev has repeatedly warned against religious extremism and fanaticism in his speeches delivered at the meetings of Central Asian leaders. These statements, portraying Islam as a national security threat, set the tone for anti-religious policies and stricter measures against the alleged Islamists (Turakbayev 2003). In his 2005 presidential address to the people of Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev named terrorism, political instability and religious extremism as the gravest threats of the twenty-first century and serious obstacles to the economic, social and political modernization of the country. The following year, the President called on the Kazakh National Security Committee (KNB) to do its utmost to protect the security of Kazakhstan. Spurred by this appeal, the KNB published a series of reports discussing what the agency branded as the 'burning' question of terrorism and religious extremism in the country. The Kazakh military has also been convinced that religious extremism and terrorism pose a real and serious threat to Kazakhstan. The republic's Defence Ministry initiated the creation of Special Forces placed under the supervision of Kazakhstan's Secret Service with a view to increasing the army's preparedness to defend the country from unconventional threats (Omelicheva 2011).

There are, however, few objective bases for these fears. Kazakhstan has never been targeted by Islamic militants. There has barely been any activity that could be defined as 'terrorist' in the state (see, for example, Global Terrorism Database [2009]). The official reports issued by the government attest that no terrorist attack has been carried out successfully in Kazakhstan. Due to the unique historical and socio-cultural bases of Islam in the republic, radical expressions of Islam are inimical to the majority of Kazakh Muslims. Kazakhstan has been the bastion of moderate and traditional forms of Islam. What, then, explains the securitization of religion?

Accounting for the securitization of Islam in Kazakhstan

According to the securitization framework, securitization of social phenomena is a politically significant act. Security framing provides a powerful political tool for investing security rationality in the policy areas that fall outside of a traditional definition of security. In this way, political discourse about novel security threats bestows political weight to the newly securitized areas and confers extraordinary authority upon the institutions that manage issues within these policy realms. When a phenomenon is securitized, it lends itself to being responded to in specific ways. By conceptualizing Islam as a security threat, policy makers can resort to unprecedented state-centred solutions, and use whatever means necessary to protect and defend the nation from the threat (Wæver 1995, pp. 55–65, Gündüz 2007).

An effective securitization is always context-dependent. It succeeds within and as part of the socio-political and historical circumstances in which the invocation of security makes sense. It must also resonate with the psycho-cultural disposition of the people (Balzacq 2005). In addition, securitization is power-laden; it is contingent on the power and resources available to different political institutions and social groupings within the state and among states. Below, I examine the main institutions with a vested interest in securitizing Islam in Kazakhstan. Next, I discuss the context and audience, which made securitization of Islamic religion effective.

Institutions benefiting from securitization of Islam

Islam is not the only religion that made a vigorous comeback in Kazakhstan. Since Russians constitute a considerable portion of the republic's population, Christian revival took place alongside the Islamic renaissance. In addition, a great variety of foreign religious groups inundated the country in the 1990s changing its confessional structure beyond recognition in a very short period of time. The arrival of new religions has been unsettling for the Orthodox Church and the Muslim Spiritual Board, which fear losing control over the republic's religious sector. The representatives of these religious confessions have been interested in securitizing Islam and stricter religious laws and regulations (Peyrouse 2008, p. 388).

The Orthodox hierarchy in Kazakhstan faces competition from Catholic and Protestant churches as well as from the host of new denominations ranging from the Hare Krishna groups to various evangelical Christian sects. These groups are typically more affluent than local religious organizations and, therefore, capable of providing various forms of material support to entice new members (Khalid 2007, p. 137). Kazakhstan's Muslim Spiritual Board is challenged by a wide spectrum of alternative Islamic movements perceived as a threat to the DUMK (Asanbaev 2006). The Spiritual Board adheres to a rather paternalistic conception of religion that contradicts the contemporary trends of Islam in Kazakhstan. By putting considerable pressure to conform to its religious views, the Spiritual Board inadvertently deters the mosque-goers who prefer alternative and more personalized ways of practising religion (Peyrouse 2007).

The alliance of Christian Orthodoxy and Islam has been bolstered through the promulgation of ideas about the similarity of their spiritual and ethical bases and correspondence of those bases to values shared by the peoples of Kazakhstan. It has been said that both religions integrate traditional practices and beliefs of the Russians and Kazakhs and, therefore, their religious elements are intertwined with various aspects of the Russian and Kazakh lifestyles (Peyrouse 2008). Both Orthodox and Muslim authorities have been encouraging the government of Kazakhstan to support the two main confessions by portraying themselves as important traditional faiths native to the land, intimately connected to its history, and loyal to the political regime (Kurganskaia 2002). Theological disputes have been avoided at any cost and representatives of both religions have stressed the expediency of Christian–Islamic inter-faith dialogue. It has been declared that harmonious relations between Orthodoxy and Islam are the only way to ensure social order and inter-ethnic accord.

Securitization of Islam has also benefited the state and its governing regime. Kazakhstan's constitution enshrines the principle of the separation of state and religion prohibiting the government's interference in the business of religious groups. Kazakhstan has always fancied itself as a model of spiritual tolerance, inter-faith dialogue, and a meeting place of various religions. President Nazarbayev engineered a number of projects aimed at fostering religious accord and inter-ethnic peace. The Assembly of People of Kazakhstan representing nearly 100 ethnic groups was created in 1995 with the goal of representing the multi-ethnic population of the republic at national level. The Kazakh President initiated regular meetings with representatives of religious denominations, and these gatherings evolved into the Congress of World and Traditional National Religions held in Kazakhstan. Nazarbayev pioneered the idea of the 'Palace of Nations' envisioned as a global centre for religious and inter-ethnic dialogue. The construction of the palace began in 2004 and a new Temple of Peace and Harmony housing a mosque, an Orthodox church, a synagogue and a Buddhist temple in a single complex was inaugurated two year later. Recently, the Kazakh authorities launched a new project – World Forum of Spiritual Culture – for fostering spirituality and strengthening dialogue between diverse cultures of the modern world.

In practice, however, the implementation of religious policies has departed from the avowed commitment to religious freedoms. The Kazakh authorities supervise religious life and exercise significant influence over the DUMK and other religious institutions. The government has been narrowing the space for religious pluralism by toughening national legislation. In 2005, for example, under the guise of combating terrorism and religious extremism, the Kazakh government pushed through a series of amendments to religious laws, which established a requirement for the registration of missionary activities in Kazakhstan. Unregistered missionary work became illegal in Kazakhstan and unregistered religious activities, including worshipping, were turned into administrative offences (Human Rights Watch 2008). The law provided legal grounds for the growing number of arrests of Islamic missionaries and deportation of the alien Muslims from the republic for illegal missionary work (Interfax 2007).

In 2007, Kazakhstan approved a draft of the law which would have established a licensing regime for religious organizations. The amendments would have imposed a stringent registration procedure for the majority of religious groups, while the registered organizations would have come under the watchful eye of the state and local administrations. Although the draft law was harshly criticized by religious and human rights activists at home and abroad, it successfully passed through both chambers of the Kazakh Parliament in 2008. It was a decision of Kazakhstan's Constitutional Council declaring the restrictive provisions of the law unconstitutional that prevented this piece of legislation from coming into force (Bayram 2009).

These policies of Kazakhstan place a big question mark over its acceptance of religious freedoms. Through the process of securitization of Islam, the government of Kazakhstan was able to

impart authority and legitimacy to its political decisions. By invoking the threat of religious extremism and terrorism, it has been able to adopt stricter religious legislation without establishing a logical or empirical connection between Islam and terrorism.

If the 'cultural' Islam of the Soviet era provided a handy material for the construction of a new collective identity of Kazakhstan, the process of securitization of Islam has become a tool for its strengthening and authentication. National identity is defined through explicit or implicit rules of membership according to which individuals are included in or excluded from this social category. It is also expressed through a set of characteristics that are supposedly shared by members of the group. Both the rules of membership in a social category as well as its content are highly contested aspects of national identity. The government of Kazakhstan has appropriated Islam as a national marker and a common trait of the Kazakhs. It has also emphasized 'moderate' and traditional forms of Islam as defining features of the Kazakh religion. Instead of searching for and articulating the common cultural bases of a national identity and traditional Islam, the government has resuscitated a false dichotomy of 'official' and 'unofficial' or 'radical' Islam. It has declared an urgent need to fight the threat of 'radical' Islam as a way of forging unity around some vague and politically constricted notion of 'official' Islam without having to make its content explicit. By asserting the threat of 'unofficial' Islam, the government has been able to nurture an idea of the existence of some core Islamic values that the Kazakh Muslims share without having to critically and systematically reflect on what constitutes 'traditional' Islam in Kazakhstan.

Context for the securitization of Islam

Securitization of a social phenomenon can only succeed in an appropriate context, which includes an audience receptive to the claim that a specific development in social life constitutes a threat, as well as circumstances in which the invocation of security is appropriate and effective (Balzacq 2005). In Kazakhstan, the historical, ideational and socio-political context for Islam, including the collective and individual understandings of religion, the Soviet-era politics of Islam, and religious renaissance accompanying Kazakhstan's independence, has been amenable to the securitization of Islam. The people's identification with localized forms of Islam and counterposition of those forms to universal and 'normative' aspects of Islamic religion provided a context for the creation of various dichotomies, which were reinforced during Soviet times. Today, many in the Kazakh social and political circles continue to think about Islam in these simplistic terms. Only now in place of the 'official' and 'parallel' Islam is an opposition between 'traditional' Islam rooted in the local history and 'fundamentalist' Islam that is alien to the country and its people. The discourse of securitization feeds off these deeply ingrained dualisms of 'traditionalism' and 'fundamentalism' and opposition of local and foreign Islam, and 'good' and 'bad' Muslims.

The domestic audience has been largely receptive to securitization of religion. On the one hand, the discourse of securitization resonates with the people's experiences with 'local' and 'foreign' Islam (for instance, through their encounters with foreign Islamic missionaries) and their common knowledge about the religion. On the other hand, there is a degree of expediency in the dichotomous interpretations of Islam as these interpretations assert and reinforce national and local identities of the Kazakhs, particularly against the Russians who had long overshadowed local cultural life (Khalid 2007, p. 119). Because of the close connection between religious and ethnic national categories, both public authorities and ordinary people eagerly embraced 'traditional' Islam as part of the greater ethnic idea. This local, cultural or 'traditional' Islam has become the glue holding the Kazakh people together. Securitization of

'non-traditional' forms of Islam, alien to Kazakhs, has served to strengthen the unity of the Kazakh nation.

Securitization of Islam in Kazakhstan has occurred in a conducive global context, where both the circumstances and the international audience have been receptive to the invocation of security in relation to Islam. Since the early 1990s, the Kazakh government has zealously promoted the image of the country as a modern democratic state and a bridge between Eastern and Western civilizations. For representatives from the West, this image and reputation of Kazakhstan has been contingent on the republic's commitment to democratic reforms and greater respect for human rights, including support for religious freedoms.

In light of the strong association of Islam with traditionalism and danger in the West, the Kazakh authorities faced a dilemma of reconciling the need to accommodate Islam as part of the greater national idea and positioning their country as a modern secular state. Another quandary revolved around the inconsistency of the state's practices of religious discrimination with Kazakhstan's avowed commitment to religious pluralism. Not only did these debates provide an appropriate context for securitization of Islam, the latter has also served as an instrument for resolving these tensions. It has been said that 'traditional' Islam appropriated by the state does not diminish its status of the 'modern' nation because Kazakhstan's Islam has always been a constitutive element of the national identity and cultural tradition. By accepting the dichotomous representations of Islam and embracing 'traditional' Islamic religion, the political elite of Kazakhstan have earned sufficient Islamic credentials. Securitization of Islam has allowed the government to partake in the process of shaping the meaning of 'official' and 'traditional' Islam. It has also been used for legitimizing the government's control over the spread of Islamic religion.

The securitization of Islam would not have succeeded in Kazakhstan had this process taken place outside of the vigorous discourse over Islam that has raged since the 9/11. In the context of 'war on terror', distinctions between the two faces of Islam – tolerant and spiritual on the one hand, and intolerant and fundamentalist on the other, have been popularized and reified. These binary visions of 'good' and 'bad' Islam and the discourse of Islamic danger provided an impetus and a lifeblood for the process of securitization of Islam in Kazakhstan.

Since 9/11 Kazakhstan has stepped up cooperation with international organizations, regional institutions and individual states in the realm of counterterrorism. The intensification of contact with Russia, China and other Central Asian republics encouraged harmonization of their understanding of the nature and magnitude of terrorist threat. For instance, all members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization and Shanghai Cooperation Organization developed similar rosters of terrorist organizations. In 2004, Kazakhstan's Supreme Court issued a ruling in which it recognized al-Qaeda, the East Turkistan Islamic Party, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and other lesser-known groups, which were banned as terrorist organizations in Russia, China and other Central Asian states. Six months later, another Kazakh court outlawed activities of Hizb-ut-Tahrir, pronouncing this group an extremist organization. A representative of Kazakhstan's Prosecutor-General's Office explained: 'It does not mean that all these organizations are active in Kazakhstan [...] The decision to ban them is a preventive measure. These organizations are considered as terrorist [sic] in the Russian Federation, the United States, Turkey, Uzbekistan, and Pakistan' (Saidazimova 2005). There has also been mounting peer pressure on the republic to recognize terrorism as a primary security threat. On several occasions, the Uzbek authorities chastized their counterparts in Kazakhstan for providing a safe haven for militants' camps, where some suicide bombers for terrorist attacks in Uzbekistan's capital were allegedly trained. Although officially Astana denied these accusations as downright incorrect, it nonetheless took a harsher stance in its counterterrorism measures (Omelicheva 2011).

President Bush and leaders of the European states have frequently underscored the fact that their war against terrorism was not tantamount to a fight against Islam. Still, there has been a flood of speeches, news articles and even academic works demonizing radical Islam or openly participating in bashing of the Islamic faith (Kaya 2009, pp. 6–7). The reporting system and the mechanisms of accountability established within regional and global institutions, particularly the reporting system administered by the United Nations Counterterrorism Committee created in 2001, compelled the governments to demonstrate the effectiveness of their counterterrorism policies, thus indirectly encouraging the perceptions of Islam as a threat.

Conclusion

This essay attempted to review the nature of Islam in modern Kazakhstan and examine its role in contemporary Kazakh society and politics. I highlighted the unique place of Islam in the social and individual experiences of Kazakhs who see Islamic religion as an integral part of their life. There is a strong association of religious identity with ethnic identity of Kazakhs, while their religious beliefs and behaviour interpenetrate with indigenous traditions and spiritual knowledge. This fusion of scriptural Islam with traditional practices and values has given rise to the so-called 'folklorized' forms of Islam. Another remarkable development characterizing Islam in Kazakhstan is its growing 'individualization' manifested in the search for more intimate and personal experiences of the Divine.

In this essay, I also concurred with critical assessments of dichotomous characterizations of Islam, such as 'official' and 'unofficial' or 'traditional' and 'fundamentalist' Islam. These totalizing statements have become very trendy in and outside Kazakhstan due to their simplicity in presenting a multifaceted and little-known phenomenon of localized Islam. These descriptors are, however, misleading. They misrepresent a much more complex reality of Kazakhstan's Islam, which is far from being homogenous and immune to historical change, internal and external challenges, and other socio-political impact. These representations of Islamic religion are also politically charged and conducive to political discourse about the danger of Islam.

The political life of Kazakhstan has exhibited a different and worrisome trend of the securitization of Islam, which refers to a discursive process of the creation of a new understanding of certain forms of Islam as existential threats to the state, community and people. According to the Copenhagen School of security studies, security is a social construct, an idea, which emerges in a specific historical and socio-political context and arises out of political discourse. Subsequently, to understand why Islam in Kazakhstan has been securitized, despite the fact that the country's Islamic tradition is largely inimical to 'fundamentalist' Islam, this paper examined a broader context, which provided an opportunity for the invocation of security in relation to Islam, as well as political interests that benefited from the discourse of Islamic danger. This study showed that securitization of Islam in Kazakhstan was spurred on by both developments in the global arena and local attempts to control and define Islam.

Securitization of Islam in Kazakhstan is a troublesome phenomenon with potentially negative consequences for the political stability of the country and socio-economic wellbeing of its people. The process of securitization is used as an instrument for legitimizing otherwise illegitimate policies and measures adopted by the governing regime and for justifying the state's meddling in religious affairs to the disadvantage of religious pluralism and other civil and political freedoms. By securitizing Islam, the fear of 'unofficial' expressions of this religion becomes a political currency that the government can use for not only extending its control over religion, but also for concocting an image of national unity and building national identity without revisiting and reflecting upon on the sources of unity (Wæver 1995, p. 52).

Oppressive and restrictive measures against the religious sector are counterproductive. Limiting religious freedoms and curtailing the autonomy of religious associations generates a further cleavage between the people and the state and turns religion into a counterweight to authorities. By controlling the diversity and spread of Islam in Kazakhstan, the government, inadvertently, contributes to the emergence of social forces ready to embrace an alternative Islam, which may be destined to transform itself into more radical forms (Peyrouse 2007). The portrayal of 'unofficial' Islam as a threat to the state and the adoption of repressive measures to counter its manifestations results in a paradox: the Kazakh government expresses fears of 'radical Islam', yet, at the same time, through its pubic discourse, policies and reactions, fosters Islamic radicalization. The securitization of Islam impoverishes and threatens the very survival of Islamic faith inciting pious Muslim to resent the interference of authorities into the religious sector. In this way, measures that are intended to prevent or deter radicalization of Islamic groups may actually provoke discontent and induce the transformation of religious conservatism into fundamentalism (Cesari 2009)

Note

1. This feature of Islam is not specific to Kazakhstan but characteristic of post-Soviet religiosity more generally.

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