

# Islam, Securitization, and Secularism in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan: Negotiating Identity and State Policy

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## Abstract

*There has always been a fundamental tension between Islam and secularism, as well as between Islam and nationalism, during the critical early stages of nation and state-building in the modern Islamic world. Kazakhstan is no exception in this regard. As the Kazakh state reconstructs a secular national identity while facing a growing Muslim population, it faces the same challenges of negotiating the relationship between Islam and secularism and reconciling Islam with its secular governance model as other nations. In the post-Soviet context, Islam is not merely a localized socio-cultural phenomenon but is increasingly interconnected with global Islamic movements. This dynamic often creates friction with local traditions and official nation-building policies. This paper analyzes the interplay between Islam, securitization, and secularism in post-Soviet Kazakhstan and their impact on the implementation of restrictive policies toward religion. Through discourse analysis, this study examines how Islamic revival is framed as a security concern and how this framing informs restrictive state policies. It argues that securitization reinforces assertive secularism by narrowing the scope of acceptable religious expression and legitimizing expanded state control. Drawing on policy documents, media narratives, and scholarly discourse, the research highlights the historical and political legacies that continue to shape Kazakhstan's approach to religion. The study calls for a more nuanced policy framework that distinguishes between ideological*



*extremism and legitimate religious practice, ensuring both national security and freedom of belief.*

**Keywords:** *Islam in Kazakhstan; National Identity; National Security; Religious Revival; Secularism; Securitization; State Policy*

## INTRODUCTION

The collapse of former communist atheist ideology has been accompanied by rapid and largely uncontrolled religious revival in the post-Soviet period that led to the emergence of various religious movements (Clay, 2000; Panchenko, 2004; Rohtmets & Ringvee, 2013). This phenomenon quickly became a significant concern for the Kazakh government and, as Peyrouse (2007) observed has sparked extensive debate within government institutions, religious hierarchies, and faith communities. Kazakh authorities, nationalists, and individuals with strong ethnic affiliations perceived religious diversity as a threat to the preservation of traditional culture and called for restrictions on missionary activity and the tightening of religious legislation (Mustafayeva et al., 2023; Toilybekova et al., 2024; Tungatova & Kurmanaliyeva, 2023).

This concern was particularly acute regarding Islam. Although Islam has historically been an integral part of Kazakh ethnic identity, the rise of pious Islamic movements (Schwab, 2011, 2019; Tucker, 2015) in post-Soviet Kazakhstan significantly altered this relationship. The new Islamic identity, largely shaped by external influences and foreign religious sources, often diverged from or directly contradicted local traditional Islamic practices and customs. This development, along with the political activism of Islamist groups in neighboring Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, led the Kazakh government to securitize Islam. As the Kazakh state sought to reconstruct a secular nation amid a growing Muslim population, it faced the same challenges as other

states in negotiating the intersections of Islam and secularism, as well as Islam and security concerns. In the post-Soviet context, Islam was no longer an isolated socio-cultural phenomenon but became increasingly interconnected with global Islam, introducing diverse interpretations of the socio-political order and posing challenges to the initially weak governments of post-Soviet Central Asia (Karimov et al., 2024; Monastireva-Ansdell, 2021; Omidid et al., 2024; Zhussipbek et al., 2020).

Given that Kazakhstan has a predominantly Muslim population and could, in theory, use Islam to legitimize its authority, Kazakh state like other Central Asian governments adopted a restrictive approach toward Islam. What are the key reasons behind its adoption of assertive secularism and securitization policy? This paper aims to examine how security concerns over the resurgence of Islam actually impacts and shapes the state policy on religion, particularly the adoption of assertive secularism and securitization policy.

## **METHOD**

### **Research Design and Analytical Approach**

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in interpretive social science. Its primary objective is to explain how Islam has been framed as a security issue in post-Soviet Kazakhstan and how this framing has shaped state policies toward religion. Rather than measuring religious behavior quantitatively, the research focuses on meanings, representations, and institutional logics embedded in official and expert discourse. The analytical orientation is inductive: patterns and explanations emerge from systematic engagement with texts rather than from hypothesis testing through statistical inference.

The study is anchored in securitization theory as developed by the Copenhagen School (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Wæver, 1995; Wæver et al., 1993). Within this framework, security is understood not as an

objective condition but as a discursive construction produced through political speech acts. This theoretical lens is particularly suitable for examining religion–state relations in Kazakhstan, where policy responses to Islam cannot be explained solely by levels of violence or radical activity. Instead, they must be understood through how Islam is narrated, categorized, and problematized in public and institutional discourse.

### **Discourse Analysis as Methodological Strategy**

The core methodological strategy employed in this study is qualitative discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is used to examine how Islam is represented as a threat, how distinctions between “traditional” and “non-traditional” Islam are constructed, and how these representations justify regulatory and securitized policy responses. Following the Copenhagen School, the analysis treats discourse not merely as language but as a form of social practice that produces political effects (Omelicheva, 2011; Wæver, 1995).

The analytical process focuses on identifying recurring narratives, metaphors, classifications, and problem definitions related to Islam in Kazakhstan. Special attention is given to how security language is deployed by political authorities, experts, and state-affiliated institutions, and how this language normalizes exceptional measures in the religious sphere. By tracing these discursive patterns, the study demonstrates how securitization operates as a mechanism that expands state control while narrowing the boundaries of legitimate religious expression (Lemon, 2021; Thibault, 2020).

### **Data Sources and Corpus Selection**

The empirical material for this study consists of three primary categories of textual sources. First, official state documents and policy frameworks are analyzed, most notably the *Concept of State Policy in the Religious Sphere of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2017–2020*. This

document is treated as a key institutional articulation of state priorities, threat perceptions, and regulatory objectives regarding religion.

Second, the study draws on media narratives and public expert discourse, including academic publications, policy-oriented analyses, and scholarly interpretations of Islam and security in Central Asia (eg. [Burghart & Sabonis-Helf, 2018](#); [Lemon, 2021](#); [Montgomery et al., 2016](#); [Montgomery & Heathershaw, 2016](#); [Omelicheva, 2011](#)). These sources are used not as neutral descriptions of reality but as part of the broader discursive environment that shapes and legitimizes state policy choices.

Third, the research incorporates historically grounded secondary literature addressing Soviet and post-Soviet approaches to Islam, nation-building, and secularism ([Khalid, 2014](#); [Koser, 2016](#); [Roy, 2013](#); [Ubiria, 2016](#)). These works provide essential contextual depth, allowing contemporary securitization practices to be traced genealogically to earlier ideological frameworks rather than interpreted as purely reactive responses to recent events.

### **Analytical Procedure and Coding Logic**

The analytical procedure proceeded in several stages. First, the selected texts were read closely to identify explicit references to security, extremism, radicalism, national stability, and secularism in relation to Islam. These references were coded thematically, with particular attention to how problems were defined and which forms of religious behavior were presented as socially or politically undesirable.

Second, the analysis examined how these problem definitions were linked to proposed or implemented policy measures, such as increased surveillance, legal restrictions, or the promotion of “traditional” Islam through state-supported institutions. This stage made it possible to trace the causal logic implicit in the discourse: how

the identification of a threat leads to the legitimization of specific governance practices (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

Third, the coded themes were interpreted in light of historical and regional contexts. Soviet-era narratives portraying Islam as backward, foreign, or inherently political were analyzed as enduring cognitive frames that continue to structure contemporary discourse (Khalid, 2014; Koser, 2016; Thibault, 2020). This step ensured that securitization was not treated as a sudden or isolated phenomenon but as a historically embedded process.

### **Validity, Limitations, and Ethical Considerations**

To enhance analytical validity, the study triangulates multiple types of sources, official documents, academic literature, and expert discourse, rather than relying on a single institutional perspective. This triangulation reduces the risk of reproducing state narratives uncritically and allows competing interpretations to be assessed against one another. However, the study does not claim to represent the lived experiences of all religious actors in Kazakhstan, as it does not rely on interviews or ethnographic fieldwork.

The primary limitation of this methodology lies in its focus on discourse rather than direct policy outcomes or individual religious practices. While discourse analysis is effective for explaining how policies are justified and normalized, it cannot on its own measure the social impact of those policies. Nevertheless, given the research aim, to explain why and how Islam is securitized, this approach remains methodologically appropriate.

Ethically, the study relies exclusively on publicly available documents and published scholarly sources. No personal data were collected, and no vulnerable populations were directly involved. As such, the research poses no ethical risk to individuals or communities while contributing to a more critical understanding of religion–state relations in post-Soviet contexts.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### **The Securitization of Islam: Global, Regional, and National Trends**

After the collapse of the USSR, numerous speculations emerged regarding the political and ideological role of Islam in the development of future Central Asian Muslim majority nation-states. In both foreign and domestic academic and expert circles, there was widespread concern that Central Asian states might integrate into the Islamic world, becoming centers of fundamentalism and radicalism (Tazmini, 2001). The majority of studies on Islam during the years of independence have focused on its links with extremism and terrorism, as well as the threats it poses to national security (Heathershaw & Megoran, 2011; Horsman, 2005; Lemon, 2021; Lemon & Thibault, 2018; Montgomery & Heathershaw, 2016; Thibault, 2020; Yemelianova, 2014).

At both regional and international levels, the perceived threat of Islam has become a central theme in official discourse, particularly influencing the actions of law enforcement and security agencies. Thus, the resurgence of Islam in Central Asia and Kazakhstan has developed under paradoxical conditions. On the one hand, it represents a spiritual quest for people in the context of profound socio-political transformations, neoliberal reforms, and economic challenges. On the other hand, political regimes, the scientific community, and secular segments of society increasingly perceive Islam through the lens of securitization, leading to a rise in Islamophobic sentiments. This section examines the key reasons behind this trend, exploring what securitization entails, how it influences policies and public discourse concerning Islam, and its broader implications.

## **The Theory and Practice of Securitization**

The securitization theory was initially developed by leading scholars of the “Copenhagen School.” According to this theory, securitization is a discursive process in which a particular phenomenon is framed as a security threat (Wæver, 1995; Wæver et al., 1993). Importantly, the designated threat does not necessarily pose a real danger to public reality; rather, it is actors who define it as such (Lemon, 2022), making it a discursive practice. This means that even if a phenomenon does not inherently endanger security, it can still be classified as a threat through public discourse. In security studies associated with the Copenhagen School, securitization is described as a discursive process within a political community, whereby a certain phenomenon is identified as a threat (Omelicheva, 2011).

From this perspective, policymakers define certain issues as security threats and justify special measures to address them (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Once a phenomenon is framed through the lens of securitization, specific policies and legal measures are developed and reinforced in response. This process is further shaped by media coverage, state institutions, and expert discourse, which collectively shape public opinion.

The historical, political, and ideological roots of perceiving Islam as a national and state security threat in the post-Soviet space run deep. During the Russian Empire, Muslim subjects' loyalty was a persistent concern for the Tsarist government. The Soviet Union also viewed Islam as an ideological, political, and socio-cultural force that could hinder its nation-building and modernization policies. Consequently, the spread of pan-Islamist ideology in Central Asia was perceived as a dangerous force that could weaken the Soviet regime. Adib Khalid argued that, for Muslims, Islamic identity was more significant than national identity, making them less likely to become ideal Soviet citizens (Montgomery et al., 2016). According to Khalid,



the Soviet Union's nation-building and religious policies help explain contemporary perceptions and understandings of Islam. The Soviet government saw Islam as a primary obstacle and competitor in implementing its modernization and national policies (Ubiria, 2016). As a result, Islam was portrayed as a "medieval relic," a regressive force that was discriminatory in terms of gender, and this narrative became deeply ingrained in public consciousness (Ubiria, 2016). This perception of Islam, cultivated during the Soviet era, continues to shape contemporary public discourse.

Such Soviet-era narratives persist in the post-Soviet discourse, particularly in discussions and policies regarding Islam. Therefore, to fully understand contemporary public attitudes and policies toward Islam, it is crucial to assess the Soviet experience and its lasting impact.

### **The Securitization of Islam in Kazakhstan**

The securitization of Islam in Kazakhstan, according to scholars, has been occurring since the 2000s. During this period, political leadership, security experts, and representatives of major religious confessions began to actively use rhetoric about the threat posed by Islam. Radical Islam was increasingly portrayed as a danger to the state, national unity, and the country's future, with these narratives being widely disseminated by the media (Omelicheva, 2011). This, in turn, laid the foundation for stricter religious control policies and the introduction of restrictive measures (Chatterjee, 2024; Somzhurek et al., 2018; Tuyakbayev, 2003).

From the early years of independence, a "moderate" form of Islam developed in Kazakhstan. However, in national discourse, Islam has never been considered a key factor in national unity or state-building. Apart from the early nationalist parties "Zheltoksan" and "Alash" (Laruelle, 2018), which proposed an Islamic foundation for national development, no significant political force has emerged in the

past 30 years advocating for the reconstruction of state and society based on Islam.

The “Zheltoksan” movement called for Islam to be a guiding principle in the political and ideological development of a new Kazakh society. Meanwhile, the “Alash” nationalist party, named after the pre-Soviet “Alash Orda” party, sought to unite its supporters under the slogans of “Islam, Turkism, and Democracy” (Laruelle, 2018). However, neither party's platform gained widespread public support or traction. Given the weak Islamic infrastructure at the time and the highly secular nature of Kazakh society, their strategies appeared populist and disconnected from real societal demand.

Except for these cases, Kazakh nationalism, both official and unofficial, has never positioned Islam as a foundational element for national development. Discussions on national issues and prospects have focused more on strengthening the Kazakh language, reviving traditional customs, developing a national brand, and re-evaluating history. Despite this, official discourse has still framed certain aspects of Islam as a threat to national stability and security. While acknowledging the real extremist and terrorist threats posed by some global Islamist movements, it is essential to ensure that security-based approaches to Islam do not justify restrictions on the constitutional and religious rights of Muslims.

According to Khalid (2014, p. 2), “to understand contemporary elite discourse on Islam, one must not forget its deep connection to seventy years of Soviet experience”. Many current discourses, policies, and trends have their ideological roots in the Soviet period and exhibit a genealogical connection to Soviet policies (Lemon, 2022; Thibault, 2022).

Several key narratives from the Soviet era regarding Islam continue to shape post-Soviet discourse:

1. In the current official discourse, Islam is often viewed as monolithic, meaning that all Muslims are perceived as leaning toward conservatism and radicalism, which could potentially threaten the secular nature of the state. However, within the framework of globalization, Muslims cannot be homogeneous; they form a pluralistic community with diverse political, ideological, and cultural characteristics. Even the Kazakh nation itself is not a homogenous group, as cultural, ideological, and value-based unity cannot be fully established between Kazakh- and Russian-speaking Kazakhs. In this regard, it is a mistaken assumption to generalize the values and positions of a specific conservative community to all Muslim groups.
2. The notion that Islam is an ideological force pulling society backward toward conservatism and rejecting modernization of public consciousness, contemporary transformations, liberalism, gender equality, freedom, and intellectualism remains prevalent. These assumptions continue to persist in public discourse, fueled by the expansion of global media and social networks.
3. A strict dichotomy is drawn between “official” and “parallel” Islam—where the latter is deemed dangerous and radical—versus “traditional” Islam. In this context, the state institutions responsible for religious affairs, such as the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan (SAMK) and ideological committees overseeing domestic policy, actively promote the Hanafi madhhab and Maturidi theology in accordance with secular principles. This approach can be seen as a systematic strategy to suppress religious pluralism, marginalize “parallel” or “non-traditional” forms of Islam that

are not aligned with national and state ideology, and instill the concept of “traditional” Islam among Kazakh Muslims.

4. Islam is perceived as a threat to the secular character and development of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Based on this premise, state authorities responsible for religious policy express concerns about the growing trends of Islamization and tighten control over Islamic organizations. They implement strict monitoring of madrasah curricula and educational activities, intervening in their internal affairs by mandating the inclusion of specific subjects in the curriculum. The increasing number of women wearing headscarves is also viewed by secular groups and government agencies as a concerning trend that threatens the secular nature of the state. The process of Islamization in Kazakh society is frequently compared to that in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran, reinforcing narratives that it could pose risks to the secular state and society.

Several scholars argue that the political discourse on religion in Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, is a continuation of the Soviet-era discourse ([Thibault, 2022](#)). For instance, Islam is often characterized as “foreign,” an ideology that “pulls society backward,” and “potentially dangerous,” which remains at the core of Kazakhstan's political discourse. The approach of Central Asian governments toward Islam has largely retained its Soviet-era content and even language. This discourse is built on classifications of “correct” versus “incorrect” Islam and “traditional” versus “non-traditional” Islam ([Rasanayagam, 2010](#)). Muslims who do not conform to officially recognized traditions are often labeled as “extremists,” “Wahhabis,” “Salafis,” or representatives of “non-traditional” Islamic movements ([Lemon, 2022](#)).

## **Securitization of Islam and Counter-Extremist Policy as a Tool for Strengthening Political Power in the Region**

According to Balzacq, for the securitization of a social phenomenon to take place, a context predisposed to such an approach is necessary. This, in turn, requires an audience within the social system that is ready to perceive those conditions as a threat (Balzacq, 2005). In this regard, the historical, ideological, and socio-political context of Islam in Kazakhstan, along with collective and individual perceptions of religion and the Soviet-era policies and understandings of Islam, have all created the necessary preconditions for the securitization of Islam. Additionally, the global context, including international terrorism, extremism, political Islam, and Islamophobia, has contributed to this process.

In the Central Asian context, political authorities and experts tend to associate religiosity with radicalism, leading to the implementation of Islam securitization policies (Montgomery & Heathershaw, 2016). This perspective prevents an accurate understanding of the general process of Islamization and non-radical Islamic movements. As Lemon notes, "Defining certain forms of Islam as a threat provides the government with a legitimate basis for implementing control and regulatory measures against the 'bad' forms of Islam" (Lemon, 2021, p. 422). Interestingly, despite differences in religious policies, there are significant similarities in the views of Western political and academic elites and the political regimes and intellectuals of Central Asia regarding Islam. According to Laruelle, both sides conflate Islamic practices and spiritual quests with political Islam and radical paths aimed at forced societal change (Laruelle, 2018). This, according to the scholar, distorts the proper understanding of Islam's role in Central Asian societies and justifies policies inclined toward security measures.

Another scholar studying Islam and securitization in Kazakhstan argues that state actors predominantly portray Islam in a hostile manner, while academic and journalistic writings further disseminate and reinforce this perspective (Thibault, 2022). For instance, between 2008 and 2018, there were 18 terrorist attacks in Central Asia that claimed 134 lives, with half of these incidents occurring in different regions of Kazakhstan (Lemon, 2018). Scholars note that this number is significantly lower than in other regions: between 2002 and 2018, terrorist attacks in the Middle East and North Africa resulted in 94,700 deaths. Despite Central Asia's relative religious stability, many scholars and analysts continue to regard it as a conducive environment for Islamic radicals (Akbarzadeh, 2018; Kevlihan, 2016; Matveeva, 2018; Matveeva & Giustozzi, 2018; Olimova & Olimov, 2014; Seifert, 2011, 2012; Yashlavskii, 2022). These conclusions align with the narratives about the threat of Islamic radicalism in Central Asian states (Thibault, 2022).

There is a fundamental misunderstanding in the discourse on Islam regarding its definition. Spiritual quests for identity formation and Islamism as a political ideology are two distinct phenomena (Balci, 2021; Farrell, 2019). Islamism, or political Islam, is a political ideology aimed at seizing power and restructuring society based on Islamic principles. In the Central Asian context (excluding the 1992–97 civil war between the state and Islamic opposition in Tajikistan), there is no evidence of widespread public support for political Islam. Moreover, the establishment of religiously-based political parties is legally prohibited, and there is no observable emergence of such parties or movements. Political Islam or Islamism can only gain traction among Muslims under conditions conducive to its expansion, such as widespread restrictions on Muslim rights. To disseminate and promote political Islamist ideology in the public sphere, specific channels and contextual conditions are required. With the physical

defeat of the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, the political Islam project has lost its appeal and relevance. Nevertheless, this project managed to recruit thousands of Muslims from 143 countries, including entire families, making it impossible to ignore the threat posed by such transnational religious ideologies.

Scholars studying the relationship between Islam, security, and authoritarianism in Central Asia argue that many of the suspicions and predictions of Western, Russian, and domestic experts and policymakers regarding Islam have not materialized (Balci, 2021). The Islamic revival in Central Asian countries has not followed the patterns of Iran or Saudi Arabia in the Middle East or Pakistan and Afghanistan in Asia. One major reason is that the local population in Central Asia emerged from an atheist society, with secular worldviews remaining dominant. In public discourse, intellectuals and scholars often express concerns about the rapid development of Islamization, fearing it may undermine Kazakhstan's secular nature.

In this regard, there are two possible scenarios for the process of Islamization. The first is political Islamization, which involves top-down enforcement of Islamic principles through national legislation and governance. This scenario has occurred in countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran. The second is grassroots, organic process of religious identity formation, which does not necessarily involve political engagement or the seizure of power. Over the past decade, an increase in religiosity has not necessarily led to a rise in radicalism. Furthermore, growing religious adherence is not driven by the expansion of international extremist and terrorist organizations but rather by complex socio-economic, political, and psychological factors within society. Without empirical evidence proving a direct correlation between religiosity and radicalism, viewing Islamization exclusively through a security discourse and restricting the religious rights of Muslim communities is not a sound strategy.

Secondly, it is neither feasible nor the state's responsibility to enforce a single interpretation of Islam on the entire Muslim community in Central Asia and Kazakhstan. Restricting or banning Islamic movements and religious discourses (as long as they do not promote terrorist or extremist activities) is unrealistic within the framework of globalization, just as it is with other ideological and cultural movements.

### **The Politics of Secularism and the Challenge of Negotiating Religion in Secular States**

Secularism and secularization processes are deeply shaped by the historical, socio-political, economic, and cultural characteristics of individual societies. Over the past two centuries, multiple interpretations of secularism have emerged, demonstrating its inherent flexibility (Martínez-Torrón & Durham, 2012). The separation of state and religion is not a universal principle but varies according to national contexts.

Two primary models of secularism have shaped state-religion relations (Castle & Schoettmer, 2019):

1. Passive (open) secularism – A model in which the state remains neutral, allowing the public manifestation of religion while refraining from endorsing a specific faith.
2. Active (assertive) secularism – A model in which the state actively restricts religious influence in the public sphere and confines religious practices to private life.

Berger (2014) identifies three main trajectories of secularism:

1. Moderate secularism, as exemplified by the American model, which ensures religious freedom while maintaining a clear separation between church and state.
2. Radical secularism, as seen in the French concept of *laïcité*, which restricts religious expression in public spaces.



3. Total secularization, such as the Soviet model, which sought to suppress religion altogether.

Some scholars distinguish between “hard” and “open” secularism. While hard secularism prioritizes the exclusion of religion from public life, open secularism emphasizes freedom of conscience and state neutrality, ensuring equal treatment of religious and non-religious groups (Goldstein, 2022; Kettell, 2019; Nolte, 2025; Scherer, 2014).

Bouchard & Taylor (2008) caution against defining secularism through rigid formulas such as “separation of church and state” or “neutrality of the state,” as these principles must be adapted to specific sociopolitical contexts. Taylor (2007) similarly argues that no single model of secularism can be universally applied, as the implementation of secular principles depends on the historical and cultural evolution of each society (Akan, 2023; Horan, 2014; Hunter, 2011; Ungureanu & Monti, 2019).

Critics of Islam and secularism often argue that they are inherently incompatible, viewing secularism as a cornerstone of democracy and liberalism while perceiving Islam as theocratic. However, the experience of post-Soviet states suggests that Islam and secularism can be reconciled, albeit through strict state control over religious life. This approach, however, risks marginalizing Muslim communities and infringing upon religious freedoms.

### **Secularism and State Policy Toward Religion in Kazakhstan**

Officially, Kazakhstan is a secular, democratic, and unitary republic. The Constitution enshrines the principle of secularism and the separation of state and religion. However, in practice, the state exercises extensive control over religious activities. Here, several key factors that explain Kazakhstan’s restrictive stance toward Islam:

1. Historical and Political Legacy – Kazakhstan’s post-Soviet political structure remains largely authoritarian, shaped by Soviet-era bureaucratic and governance models (Akhmetova, 2018; Roy, 2000). The ruling elite often perceive a strong Islamic identity as a threat to national cohesion and secular governance (Olcott, 1995, 2002).
2. Security Concerns – The perceived threat of religious extremism has justified restrictive policies, with state discourse framing Islam as a potential security challenge (Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2006).
3. Differentiation Between Traditional and Non-Traditional Religions – Unlike the strict *laïcité* model, Kazakhstan actively promotes “traditional” religions while opposing “non-traditional” religious influences (Cornell et al., 2017).

Kazakhstan’s 2017-2020 Concept of State Policy in the Religious Sphere outlines key priorities for reinforcing secular principles and managing religious affairs. It identifies several challenges necessitating policy interventions, including refusals to comply with civil obligations on religious grounds, religious-based opposition to medical procedures, and conflicts between religious and secular values. According to this Official Document, Kazakh government identified several issues necessitating policy responses:

1. Instances of citizens refusing to fulfill constitutional and civil duties, showing disrespect for national laws, state symbols, cultural traditions, and ethical norms.
2. Violations of dress code regulations in educational institutions, refusal to attend classes due to religious beliefs, and parental influence leading to the rejection of certain subjects.
3. Religious-based refusals of medical vaccinations for children.

4. Increasing religious marriages conducted without official state registration, promoting archaic family values that contradict gender equality and women's social participation.
5. Conflicts among followers of radical religious movements, fostering societal divisions and undermining Kazakhstan's spiritual and cultural identity.
6. The propagation of fundamentalist and radical ideologies that threaten national stability and unity.
7. Rising tensions between radical religious groups and official religious authorities.
8. Cases of religious followers criticizing and ostracizing individuals who do not share their beliefs.

The process of Islamization in Kazakhstan continues to grow, and according to Islamic studies experts, this trend is likely to persist in the coming years, given that the majority of Kazakhstan's population identifies as Muslim. Therefore, opposing Islam to national identity, juxtaposing it against Kazakh traditions, or pursuing an exclusively exclusionary policy toward Islam is not a strategically viable approach. While maintaining Kazakhstan's secular character, it is essential to create conditions that allow Muslims to feel secure in their rights and identity as citizens of their own country. A reconsideration of the aspects of Islam's securitization that relate specifically to its ideological and political manifestations, rather than Islam as a whole, is necessary. It is advisable to develop a systematic and comprehensive strategy based on the research and observations of Islamic scholars.

## **CONCLUSION**

In general, not only in Kazakhstan but also in the countries of Central Asia and the broader Muslim world, there has been a tendency

to view the secular nation and Islam as opposing ideologies. This practice stems from a “knowledge base” that considers Islam and secularism to be mutually exclusive and contradictory ideologies. To some extent, political Islamic groups have also contributed to this perception. Therefore, instead of securitizing Islam as a whole, it is important to reconsider aspects of securitization policies concerning its specific ideological and political manifestations and movements. A systematic and comprehensive strategy should be developed based on sociological research and monitoring.

The secular principle of the state is one of the fundamental principles of the legal structure and functioning of most modern states worldwide. However, there are various approaches and perspectives in both foreign and domestic academic literature regarding the legal content and key characteristics of the concepts of “secularism,” “secular,” and “secularization.” Additionally, these concepts have developed unique characteristics depending on their dissemination across different socio-political systems and geo-cultural spaces.

Ideological and methodological approaches to religion of the Soviet period still persists and exerts enormous influence on the understanding of secularism in Post-Soviet period. In Kazakhstan, the principles of secularism remain a concept that requires further development in legal, value-based, and political-ideological aspects. It is crucial to promote secularism not as an anti-religious stance but as a concept that does not interfere with religious affairs while ensuring equal opportunities and rights for secular worldviews and culture in the public sphere.

Kazakhstan's re-Islamization process is influenced by various Islamic discourses, including conservative, political-ideological, cultural, and liberal perspectives. In an era of globalization and advanced information technologies, it is impossible to restrict these influences. Taking into account the rapid process of Islamization and

its role in national identity, opportunities should be created for its positive development. The modernization of Islamic infrastructure, the development of an independent Muslim elite, the rationalization of Islamic sciences, and the formation of a rational Islamic intellectual discourse will significantly contribute to the establishment of a constructive Islamic identity. This, to a certain extent, will help prevent coercion, calls for extremist activities, archaic traditions, and practices that restrict intellectual freedom.

### **Author Contributions**

Conceptualization: D.S., D.Z., Y.T., & S.B.; Data curation: D.S., D.Z., Y.T., & S.B.; Formal analysis: D.S., D.Z., Y.T., & S.B.; Funding acquisition: D.S., D.Z., Y.T., & S.B.; Investigation: D.S., D.Z., Y.T., & S.B.; Methodology: D.S., D.Z., Y.T., & S.B.; Project administration: D.S., D.Z., Y.T., & S.B.; Resources: D.S., D.Z., Y.T., & S.B.; Software: D.S., D.Z., Y.T., & S.B.; Supervision: D.S., D.Z., Y.T., & S.B.; Validation: D.S., D.Z., Y.T., & S.B.; Visualization: D.S., D.Z., Y.T., & S.B.; Writing – original draft: D.S., D.Z., Y.T., & S.B.; Writing – review & editing: D.S., D.Z., Y.T., & S.B. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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### **Informed Consent Statement**

Informed consent was not required for this study.

### **Data Availability Statement**

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the author upon reasonable request.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to this research.

## Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT and PaperPal to improve the clarity of the language and readability of the article. After using these tools, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and took full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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