AYŞEGÜL AYDINGÜN

Islam as a Symbolic Element of National Identity Used by the Nationalist Ideology in the Nation and State Building Process in Post-soviet Kazakhstan

Abstract:

The main intention of this article is to analyze the role of Islam in post-Soviet Kazakhstan and its utilization in the nation-building and state-building processes. It is argued that Islam in post-Soviet Kazakhstan is a cultural phenomenon rather than a religious one and is an important marker of national identity despite the competition of radical movements in the "religious field."



Ayşegül Aydıngün
Assist. Prof. Dr., Department of Sociology, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey.

Co-author of the books:
Tatarlarin Vatana Donusu: Kimlik ve Kulturel Canlanma (2004), The Meskethian Turks: An Introduction to their History, Culture and Resettlement Experiences (2007).

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A situation of anomie became visible in Kazakhstan beginning in the Gorbachev period and increasingly after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which necessitated a search for a new social order. Anomie, which was to a large extent the result of being in interaction with the dominant Russian culture and the oppressive Soviet regime, involved a feeling of despair that offered the opportunity of re-establishing the values and traditions of the past and new networks. Following independence, this feeling of despair, caused by the ethnocentric attitude of Russians who defined Kazak culture and nomadism as 'primitive' and wanted to replace it with a more 'civilized' modern Russian culture, was carefully elaborated by the Kazak elite aiming at building the Kazak nation. It is within this atmosphere of anomie that the cultural revival project has been launched.

The revival of Islam is expected to play a significant role in this project and Islam is being used as one of the basic elements of culture that will contribute to the integration of the new Kazak national identity. Islam, in this context, is also used as a tool in the struggle against the Russian and Soviet heritage and is expected to play an integrative role. This integrative function is perceived as necessary for the construction of Kazak national identity. The cultural revival project in general and the revival of Islam in specific emerged as a reaction against the dominant Russian/Soviet culture and to a more limited extent the non-Kazaks, who are mainly Russians living in Kazakhstan.

This reaction is in reality a nationalist reaction rather than a religious one. Religion in this case forms one of the basic elements of the cultural material that is going to be used to fill the content of the boundary of national identity. It is important to underline that the parallel revival of religion and nationalism is not a phenomenon specific to

Kazakhstan but rather a worldwide phenomenon mostly experienced by the third world societies. As a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union, post-Soviet societies have witnessed a similar process. However, it is also essential to note that these societies experience various forms of religious nationalism as a reaction to the forces of globalization of the emerging world system. To avoid false generalizations, it is important to realize that, as Spohn points out, the phenomenon of ethnic and religious nationalism should be considered together with secular and civic forms of nationalism that are developing simultaneously (2003: 265-266).

In the case of Kazakhstan, a certain religious nationalism emerged both as a reaction to global forces and to Russians. In light of those facts, it is possible to argue that the cultural revival project, which includes the revival of Islam, is revolutionary in nature. However, Islam, named as 'traditional' during the Soviet period, is now sponsored by the state and has become 'official.' Furthermore, the state elite minimized external influences and distinguished traditional Islam from fundamentalist movements. It is, in a way, very important to underline two issues: one is that religious revival in the case of Kazakhstan is not a conservative movement because it aims to change society rather than preserve the existing order, and the other is that this religious revival is in fact an important element used by the nationalist ideology aiming at building the Kazak national identity and the Kazak state. In other words, it is the protest of nationalists to the Russian expansion that goes back to the 16th century and to the anti-religious Soviet regime. Hans Kohn (1969:15) has argued that when competing identities are of different religions, religion plays an important role in the defense mechanism of the weaker nationality. This explains why religion is used as a constitutive component of Kazak national identity.

The intention of this article is neither to discuss at length the theories of nationalism and state building nor the theories of religion. The main intention is to analyze the role of Islam in post-Soviet Kazakhstan and its utilization in the construction of Kazak national identity and the building of the independent Kazak state. The analysis of Islam in both pre-Soviet and Soviet Kazakhstan is essential for a better understanding of Islam in post-Soviet Kazakhstan where Kazaks are struggling to construct their own Islamic identity as part of their national identity that is still under construction, in contrast to a sizeable Orthodox Russian population.

This article is based on the interviews conducted with Kazaks in Kazakhstan (Astana, Almaty, Atirau, and the nearby villages of Atirau: Erkinkala, Mahambet, Kulsari, Dossor; Almaty; Issyk, Kaynazar; Astana: Koşşı) in August 2002, June and October 2004, and December 2005. These cities and nearby villages are selected in order to grasp the potential differences between the three regions where three different hordes live. However, although some respondents argued that the middle horde is much closer to the Russians, that the great horde is the more traditional one and is closer to Uzbeks, and that the small horde is perceived as the one that has best preserved pure Kazak tradition, it was not possible to discern major differences among these regions during the interviews.

Islam in Pre-Soviet and Soviet Kazakhstan

The first encounter with Islam took place in the 8th century with the Arab invasions that reached today's southern Kazakhstan. Before that, various religions, including

Zoroastrianism, Shamanism, Buddhism, and Christianity dominated the region. Beginning in the 14th century, Islam spread to central, northern, and western Kazakhstan. However, until the late 18th and 19th century, the Kazak culture and popular religious practices were not significantly challenged by Islam. The self-sufficiency of the nomadic economy that limited contact with the Muslims in cities was an important element in postponing the internalization of Islam among Kazaks. The political organization in the Kazak lands was in the form of a khanate composed of various different tribes having different ethnic and religious origins. These differences did not constitute a barrier to loyalty to the political authority. However, the multi-religious character of Kazakh steppes and the nomadic way of life constituted an obstacle to the spread of Islam. The penetration of Islam to Kazakhstan took place via Sufism and the Volga Tatars. The orders of Yassaviya, Nakshbandiya, and Kubraviya have been very influential. Sunni Islam found more supporters than did Shi'a, and it can be argued that this paved the way for accommodating and incorporating the pre-Islamic rituals still surviving today. The liberal nature of the Hanafi School allowed the incorporation of pre-Islamic traditions and offered a relatively flexible framework of practice to believers. Furthermore, the Sufi tradition also contributed to the liberal nature of religion (Haghayeghi, 1996: 80-85).

The growing influence of Islam in the late 18th century, especially in the northern and central regions, was supported by the Russians via Tatars under the rule of Catherine II, who aimed to use Islam as a civilizing force that would bring order and stability to a region that rejected Christianity. Imperial Russia encouraged the spread of Islam at the end of the 16th and early 17th centuries, aiming at developing strong relations with the Muslim clergy while trying to penetrate into the Kazakh steppes. 19th century Kazakhstan witnessed a widespread penetration of Islam, and Islam became an important social and moral force in the Kazak society. However, the increasing power of Islam did not cause the effect expected by the Russians. On the contrary, it entailed the development of an anti-Russian sentiment and a sentiment of unification with other Muslim communities, and in that sense, Catherine's policy partly failed (Sagdeev, 2000: 7; Mustafina, 1998; Olcott, 1995:18-19, 46-47: Haghayeghi, 1996: 71-80). It is also important to note that Islam in Kazakh lands had to coexist with Christianity due to the penetration of Russians into the region starting with the 16th century, and this obliged in a way the development of a dialogue and interaction aiming at finding a way of coexistence. The Russian expansion towards the region should not be perceived as a crusade against Islam since it was just a sort of a colonial expansion aiming at capturing new territories, new markets, and resources. However, the encouragement of religion was later replaced by strict control over Islam in the steppes after the completion of the Russian penetration. In other words, the Russian Empire did not interfere with the religious affairs of the Muslims; on the contrary, it encouraged the spread of Islam until the emergence of resistance to Russian expansion.

Two important interruptions occurred in the process of the spread of Islam. These are the Mongol conquest, which put an end to the Arab invasions, and the Bolshevik revolution, which aimed at a secular socialist society through eliminating religion. During the Soviet period, education on the basis of Islam, the practice of Islamic rituals, and the publication of religious books were forbidden. Furthermore, mosques and madrasahs were closed down, spiritual leaders were persecuted, and children were indoctrinated with anti-Islamic and anti-religious materials (Saray, 2002:41).

Anti-Islamic policies were part of the struggle of the Soviet regime against all reli-

gious faiths. Religion for the Bolsheviks was a cultural element to be eliminated. They banned the religious institutions of all religions, including the Russian Orthodox Church. A sort of tolerance towards Islam existed just after the revolution until the early 1920s aiming at gaining the support of the Muslims of the Russian Empire. However, the collectivization period also turned out to be a period of strong campaigns against religion. During the Soviet era, the attitude of the regime towards Islam varied depending on periods, leaders, and conjectural conditions. Poujol argues that during the early years of the Soviet era, the regime adopted a relatively moderate attitude towards Islam in Central Asia to gain the support of Muslims and to weaken the Basmachi movement (1918-1928). This attitude was replaced by anti-Islamic policies in the late 1920s and 1930s. During the repressive years of Stalin, all mullahs, muftis, sheiks, and other religious figures were accused of resisting the construction of socialism and were either killed, imprisoned, or exiled. This period was also the period of destruction of mosques and all other religious institutions.

This anti-Islamist policy became relatively flexible under the pragmatism of Stalin during the Second World War, and Islam gained an official status with the establishment of four spiritual directorates until the period of Khrushchev, during which religious oppression regained significance. The period of Brejnev, however, was a period of ideological reformulation of official Islam in search of reconciling Islam with communism as opposed to the ideas of Stalin and Khrushchev. The argument was advanced that it is possible to be a good Muslim and a good communist (Poujol, 2001: 35-40). It can be said that the Soviet regime has been quite successful in eradicating Islamic learning and teaching despite the existence of a changing policy towards Islam depending on the realpolitik of certain periods, but it has not been equally successful in eliminating Islamic identity as part of an ethno-national identity. Pushed into the private sphere, excluded from the domain of politics, Islam survives as an element of cultural identity despite the intensive secularization campaign of the Soviet period, the promotion of atheism, and the persecution of Islam. One of the interviewees in Atirau, a 40 year-old teacher said,

I went to a Russian school. When we were going to cemeteries and mosques as Muslims, teachers used to tell us that we are doing wrong, that God does not exist and that Islam does not exist. They used to organize meetings to tell us that we should not believe in God, we should not go to mosques. But, we were not discriminated because of our nationalities.

As pointed out by Rorlich, the integration of Central Asian societies into the Russian Empire entailed their isolation from the Muslim world. These conditions have pushed people to reevaluate their identity and enhance the regional identity that evolved into a proto-national identity comprising Islam as one of its main elements. The conditions of the Soviet period transformed this proto-national identity into a national one, and Islam continued to be one important, if not the most important, attribute of this identity (1991: 187).

Islam in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan

After the Gorbachev reforms and especially after the adoption of the law on religion in 1989, a revival of Islam began to take place in Kazakhstan as in other Central Asian countries. The development of Islam that began quite timidly during the perestoika period became quite complicated after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Rorlich,

2003:157). The role of external influences has been crucial in this complication.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, different external forces began to compete in the "religious field" (champ religieux) as it is termed by Pierre Bourdieu. According to Bourdieu, all technological, economic, and social transformations that are correlates of the development of cities, and in particular of the progress of the division of labor and of the separation of intellectual and material work, constitute the common conditions of two processes: the constitution of a relatively autonomous religious field and the development of a need for moralization and of systematization of beliefs and religious practices (1971: 301). It is clear that Bourdieu bases his argument on the developments that took place in Western societies. However, his approach also sheds light to the developments happening in Kazakhstan, which experienced very radical economic and social transformations during peretroika and after independence.

Bourdieu's approach can be helpful in understanding competition in the "religious field" following the period of "dissolution of the religious" that took place during the Soviet period in Kazakhstan. This dissolution, which to a large extent emptied the "religious field," caused a demand for a "religious field" that entailed a competition among different external forces attempting to capture that field and responding to the demands of the people (Bourdieu, 1971). Of course, this caused the competition of different religious and political forces aiming at becoming influential not only in the "religious field," but also in the political arena. In that sense, the new cleavage is not so much between "traditional Islam" and "official Islam" but rather between "official Islam" (formerly traditional) and Islam exported by different external forces competing in the "religious field" and aiming at challenging the social order. However, the "religious field" in Kazakhstan still remains under the control of the political power.

People in Kazakhstan have witnessed a striking competition among Muslim countries including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Pakistan, which are attempting to introduce their interpretation of Islam. External influences towards Islam in Kazakhstan have been twofold. On the one hand, countries like Turkey and Saudi Arabia have been active in exporting their versions of Islam in response to a demand in the field of religion. The Turkish influence did not take a radical form and was limited to the spread of Fethullah Gülen's schools, the construction of mosques, and the support of religious personal. On the other hand, the Saudi Arabian Wahhabi version condemns Muslim celebrations, feasting, and other costly traditions such as Kalym (bridal dowry) as well as veneration of saints and deities. The latter version, known as the puritan version of observing Islam, perceives these rituals as contradictory to the purity of Islam. The Wahhabi influence is especially strong in the Fergana Valley, but it also has a limited influence in most other parts of Kazakhstan. It is influential in places where Uzbek minorities are living rather than among ethnic Kazaks (Haghayeghi, 1994; 1996: 89). This is mainly due to contradictions that exist between Wahhabi traditions and the traditional Islam observed by Kazaks. The puritanism of the Wahhabi tradition, which requires the dominance of Islam at all the levels of believer's life, and his denial of mysticism and of certain practices such as the visit to holy places, is in strong contradiction with the Kazak experience of Islam.

Some authors (such as Trisko, 2005: 377) may argue that the radicalization of Islam in Sufi areas such as the Fergana Valley contradicts the view of Haghayeghi, who argues that Sufism limits radical Islam. However, we need to consider that the regions of Kazakhstan where radical movements are supported are mostly populated by non-Kazak Muslims, mostly Uzbeks. Radical Islamic political parties and movements primarily based in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have also had an impact on Kazakhstan. For

example, the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) is one of the most powerful radical Islamist political parties. However, even IRP activities in Kazakhstan are limited to certain southern cities bordering Uzbekistan such as Chimkent and Dzambul where politically active Uzbeks are living.

The limited influence of foreign and regional radical movements cannot be explained merely by reference to the legal restrictions that have been increasingly imposed since 2005. Although the role of legal restrictions is undeniable in limiting radical movements, one needs to consider the incompatibility between the radical versions of Islam and Kazaks' traditional Islam (Haghayeghi, 1994: 189). It is the fear of the impact of these external factors that pushes Kazak authorities to take certain legal measures against radical Islamist political parties and movements. The fact that people of Kazakhstan in general and the government in particular support an Islamic revival together with a secular state rather than an Islamic one is noteworthy. The government of Kazakhstan, as other Central Asian governments, has taken measures to protect the secular nature of their administrations. Although freedom of conscience is guaranteed, religious extremism is prohibited. For instance, President Nursultan Nazarbayev created a separate muftiate in Kazakhstan in 1990 to limit the Uzbek influence (Rorlich, 2003).

A brief summary of the analysis of Nazarbayev can shed light onto the official position on Islam in Kazakhstan. According to Nazarbayev, when the national integrity is in crisis in a society for any reason, religion enters the social and political life as a spiritual unifying force, and faith helps people in difficult times of their history. However, Nazarbayev argues that in some cases Islam is reinterpreted by some groups in order to satisfy certain aggressive interests or to confront a political position. This gives way to non-tolerance towards other religions, which is religious fundamentalism. The origin of the term "religious fundamentalism" has in fact no relation with Islam. It was first used in the 1920s of certain theologically conservative Christian communities. According to Nazarbayev, religious fundamentalism is everywhere, including in the US, Europe, and Asia, and lies at the heart of all religions. Religious fundamentalism requires the strict application of all rules of the primary religious sources in daily life. He stresses that it is impossible to practice these requirements of primary sources in a democratic, secular, and civic society because a secular state has to guarantee the rights of the individual and the freedom of conscience, whereas fundamentalism imposes its conceptions on the entire society. He mentions that certain layers of the society are conducive to fundamentalist ideas.

Nazarbayev also examines globalization and says that the consumption society characterized by the dominance of a unified culture entails a culture and identity loss, although some societies like Japan and China have managed to preserve their culture. The foreign influence that entails modernization and the consciousness of the inevitability of this influence nurtures fundamentalism because it leads to a cultural and confessional reaction. He argues that the conflict between governments and religious fundamentalism is widespread and adds that coercive methods against fundamentalism will not be helpful in sorting out the problem and that they are negatively perceived by the religious layers of the society. Besides these general comments, Nazarbayev specifically explains the situation in Kazakhstan and states eloquently that religious extremism in Kazakhstan is not at a serious level. However, he believes that religious extremism should be seriously taken into consideration, or else it may become a threat to the Kazak multinational and multi-confessional society. He argues that the roots of this threat do not necessarily lie in history and stresses that traces of the antireligious repression of the

Soviet period still prevail.

Nazarbayev argues that he sees Islam as part of the Kazak culture, traditions, and customs because Muslims of Kazakhstan perceive the anti-religious policies of the Soviet period as an attack to their culture, traditions, and national customs based on religion. The revival of religion is entirely normal to him and this revival reestablishes the traditions among the elderly and the young. He sees cultural revival of spiritual traditions and the restoration of ancestral heritage as a very positive and rejoicing fact. He argues that the duty of a state is to ensure and enhance spiritual liberty as well as to oppose all threats against religion and encourage concord among religions. That is why he stresses the need for giving every citizen of Kazakhstan total liberty of conscience regardless of his/her nationality, and treating all religions equally. Indeed, Nazarbayev views Islam as a basic element of the cultural heritage and its revival as an important factor that stimulated the spiritual renaissance of the Kazak people. He argues that Islam is a factor that determines their way of perceiving the world, a symbol that pays homage to their ancestors and their Muslim culture, which, in fact, never entirely disappeared.

Nazarbayev restates that Islam in Kazakhstan is formed by the Hanafi School and Sufism, which provides a spiritual flexibility. It is this flexibility that gave room to the alliance of Islamic elements with pre-Islamic ones and the spiritual heritage of the nomadic ancestors. He also expresses that most Kazakhs follow the traditional Islam of the Sunnis, and that is why there is very limited support for radical conceptions (Nazarbayev, 2005: 61-84)

Thus, the revival of Islam is mostly interpreted and rationalized as an element of a cultural revival project that, as has been pointed out, is necessary for the formation of national identity and state-building. In other words, Islam as part of the traditional lifestyle and culture of Central Asians is used by these newly independent states, including Kazakhstan, as an important element of national self-identification. The "Islamic boom" (Sagdeev, 2000:10) can be seen in the swell of the construction of mosques and in the attitude of the former communist leaders who have ceased being shy about their Islamic identity.

Although perceived as paradoxical upon first analysis, Islamic revival and the secular regime developed simultaneously in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, using religion as an instrument for differentiating Kazaks especially from Russians in the process of national identity construction. While the new government encourages the development of traditional Islam and observation of its practices, it forbade religious political parties and restricted all radical Islamist tendencies.

Despite the aforementioned argument, the relationship between governments and Islamic political parties in Central Asia and also in Kazakhstan is far from being settled. Ahrari and Beal argue that Islam in Central Asian societies including Kazakhstan will play an important role in the politics of those states and that the leaders are well aware of this reality and are trying to postpone the inevitable (2002: 33-37). Although this comment reflects a fragment of the social reality in Kazakhstan, we have to realize that religious fundamentalism in Kazakhstan is an extension of international fundamentalism supported by certain internal opposition groups challenging the authority of the former communist nomenclatura. Thus, the approach of Ahrari and Beal overlooks the complexities of and the differences among Central Asian societies.

Considering the status of Islam in the legal domain, one should stress that Kazakhstan's first constitution was adopted in 1993 and proclaimed Kazakhstan to be a secular state. Indeed, Kazakhstan is the only secular Central Asian state that did not

accord Islam a special legal status. The freedom of religion secured in the first constitution remained unchanged in the 1995 Constitution, which again stipulates that Kazakhstan is a secular state. In the first article of general provisions of the 1995 Constitution, Kazakhstan is proclaimed as a democratic, secular, legal and social state. Article 14/2 guarantees equality of all citizens regardless of characteristics including religion. According to Article 19, everyone has the right to indicate or not indicate his/her national, political, and religious affiliation. With Article 22/1 and 22/2 every citizen has been given the right to freedom of conscience, but it is proclaimed that freedom of conscience cannot limit universal human and civil rights and responsibilities before the state. Within this atmosphere of religious freedom, different religious groups and missionaries compete in the "religious field," as has been pointed out by some respondents. A 53 year old teacher in Atirau said,

There are missionary activities in Kazakhstan. For example there are 31 registered religious groups in Atirau. People from these groups come and distribute books. They especially invite Kazak youth to participate in their groups. The freedom of conscience is guaranteed in our constitution. There is no obligation to be a believer. There is freedom and that is why different religious groups act freely (Female, 53).

A 42 year old oil engineer from Atirau stated, "I know that there are some groups such as Christians and Hare Krishna people who distribute books and attract the young people to themselves."

The 2005 legislation that limited constitutional protections of religious freedom should be interpreted within this understanding. The national security amendments, enacted on July 8, 2005, imposed mandatory registration requirements on missionaries and religious organizations. Most religious groups, including minority and nontraditional denominations, reported that the legal changes were implemented in a manner that did not materially affect religious activities. Unregistered religious groups reported an increase in court actions against them and an increase in the level of fines imposed for non-registration (International Religious Freedom Report, 2006). The fact that according to the the new legal procedures, all religious associations should register with the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Kazakhstan is noteworthy. However, although there are no reliable statistics, based on the interviews, certain non-registered religious organizations and activities that, in a way, challenge the power of the muftiate, do exist (Rorlich, 2003).

When it comes to the nature of Islam in Kazakhstan, the dominant version is a hybrid of the Sunni Islam of the Hanafi School, different forms of Sufism and some pre-Islamic practices. It is important to note that the different elements of Islam in Kazakhstan do not contradict each other; on the contrary, their combination results in a more philosophical and tolerant Islam, which is open to mysticism and distant from radical movements (Gunn, 2003). This is also supported by the comments of the respondents speaking about the survival of pre-Islamic practices. The following quotations are examples to these comments,

"There are some rituals or beliefs which are the remnants of pre-Islamic belief systems such as Shamanism. However, it is very possible to distinguish them from Islamic practices and rituals because they completely amalgamated into Islamic rituals. For example, in Kazakhstan, the cult of the spirits of the dead still prevails" (Male, 21, Atirau). "According to our beliefs the soul of the dead leaves the house three days after death." (Female, 18, Almaty). "We still have some superstitions. We usually say do not stand in the entrance and do not set foot on the ashes of fire" (Male, 40, Astana).

"There are certain characteristics that are not only specific to Kazaks but rather to most Turkic people, such as respect to the elderly, the cult of the ancestors, the cult of the spirits, and being religious. I cannot say that Kazaks are not pure Muslims. But in the Kazak lands there was also Zoroastrianism, Shamanism, and several other faiths. Kazaks amalgamated all these faiths and they transmitted them to the following generations. In a Kazak family the preservation and transmission of those traditions is very important" (Male, 18, Astana).

Celebration of Nauruz is widespread in Kazakhstan and it is perceived as a religious holiday. This can be clearly seen in the interpretation of a teacher from Atirau,

"Religious feasts in Kazakhstan are celebrated very lively. Especially the celebration of Nauruz is marvellous. In those days, the kiyiz üy (traditional Kazak house) is mounted, national food navrız köje (a special meal prepared during Nauruz) is prepared. People celebrate each other. The rituals of that day are celebrated in a very beautiful and joyful way. Apart from Nauruz we also celebrate Kurban ayt. We sacrifice animals. This is also one of our religious holidays" (Female, 53).

Nauruz has been perceived by numerous communities as the beginning of spring, the beginning of a new year. From Central Asia to the Balkans, Turkic communities have celebrated Nauruz for centuries. Nauruz was celebrated both during the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods. In Central Asia, and specifically in Kazakhstan, it is perceived as at least as important as the Kurban ayt and Oraza ayt, has become part of Islamic rituals (Köse, 2007).

Research has shown that not all Islamic rituals (especially the five pillars of Islam) are strictly observed by Kazaks, although there has been an increase in observance since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The respondents mentioned that the number of those who observe the fast and perform the daily prayers increased after independence. It was also mentioned that the young generation is very much interested in learning their religion. That attendance to religious institutions is quite popular among the young is stressed by the respondents. The research has demonstrated that the observance of Islamic rituals is on the rise especially among the young. In other words, support to the revival of Islam is not limited to the middle aged and the elderly. Most young respondents underlined the significance of the revival of traditions in general. They all mentioned the growing importance of religion after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in general and specifically among young people. A twenty year-old student said,

"My grand-parents are very religious. They used to tell me how, during the Soviet period, they had to pray in secret trying to escape the strict control of the NKVD, which was arresting religious people...Now, there are no bans... young people go to the mosque. There is a madrasa in the mosque where they learn how to read and write the Arabic alphabet and how to read the Koran. They also learn how to pray and observe the rituals."

It is interesting to note that of all the Islamic practices, the most widely observed are the rituals of circumcision, marriage, and burial as pointed out so well by Haghayeghi (1996: 98). The family, which is the basic element in the religious, ethnic, and social coherence among the Kazaks, secured the practice, although mostly in secrecy, of these rituals despite the oppressions of the regime. Almost all respondents have argued that they do not know a single Kazak man who hasn't been circumcised. Circumcision is perceived as a requirement of Islam but also a requirement of being a Kazak. Such approaches show that Islamic identity is an indispensable element of Kazakness. A young student from Atirau said, "As a requisite of Islam every man should be circumcised. Otherwise,

I am afraid, he won't even be considered as a Kazak" (female, 20). One from Atirau said, "In the past we used to think that if one is born Kazak, he has to be a Muslim. However, now there are a lot of religions and everyone is free to choose the religion he wants. Thus, it is possible to come across Kazaks who choose to believe in other religions" (Female, 33).

Similarly, interviewees have indicated that funerals were realized without any exception according the Islamic Kazak traditions. Cemeteries and mosques were places where people were able to express their religious identities with relative freedom during funerals. Most respondents stressed that these traditions survived during the Soviet period. Interviewees stated,

"During the Soviet (period) it was possible to observe Islam only through certain traditions. These were rituals related to birth, marriage, circumcision and death. Now it is different. We can freely practice everything. We celebrate openly all the religious feasts" (Male, 36, Astana).

"When I was at school during the Soviet period, people hated the children of mullahs and they were isolating them. Poor children felt so bad because of their fathers. Even Kazaks were isolating these children as far as my experiences are concerned. People were mostly believers but they were always hiding this. Everything was done under secrecy" (Female, 45, Almaty).

"During the Soviet period, there was only civil marriage. After the independence, people started to practice religious marriage. During the Soviet period, Kazak traditions were not properly and freely practiced. After independence, Sünnet Toy (circumcision ceremony) became a big event. According to our traditions, the circumcised boy mounts a horse. They decorate the horse and they take the boy from one house to another. People put gifts and pieces of fabric into the saddlebag. Nowadays we celebrate Sünnet Toy in this way" (Male, 69, Almaty).

These examples can be considered proof of the continuation of Islamic traditions despite the oppressive anti-religious and atheist propaganda of the Soviet regime. As Rorlich so well put it, the practice of rituals has been regarded as attachment to religious traditions (1991:192-193). The data gathered clearly indicated that observance of ceremonies including Kurban ayt, Oraza ayt and life-cycle rituals of engagement, marriage, birth, death, and circumcision survived during the Soviet period. Some traditions related to birth, marriage, death, and other events reflect very clearly the mixture of Islamic and pre-Islamic traditions that are now defined as part of religion regardless of whether they are linked to Islam or not. It is crucial to understand that some of the pre-Islamic rituals survived in an Islamic environment and experienced a transformation, during which they lost some of their features and became Islamised (Mustafina, 1998: 97). Some good examples are the tradition of celebrating Nauruz, the tradition of keeping the dead at home for three days (because it is believed that the spirit of the dead stays at home for three days), the tradition of constructing the tomb within 40 days (otherwise the dead will feel homeless, to avoid this a grave with a roof is necessary), and the tradition of calling for rain.

Research has also demonstrated that mosque attendance, fasting, and religious marriages have increased with independence, but it is not quite correct to claim that it has reached significant figures. A part of the interviewees have pointed out reasons for the increase of the practice of such rituals. Some have stressed that it became very trendy to practice certain rituals. A doctor from Astana said, "Religious marriages increased among young couples. I think it is trendy now. It has become very popular to practice

it. I do not think that all those who go to mosques for the religious marriage are religious people" (Female, 50). Another interviewee mentioned a similar view, "Recently, religious marriages have become very popular. It has not much to do with faith. Few hours before the wedding, the young couple goes to a mosque together with family members and friends. The mullah asks the young girl what she wants as a gift. She usually asks for jewelry and the boy promises that he will buy it to show his love to the bride" (Female, 20).

Regarding the perception of Islam by the Kazaks, in all the interviews carried out in Kazakhstan, most of the Kazaks defined themselves as believers, but they also mentioned that they support a secular system. Based on the interviews, we can easily argue that the interpretation of almost all the respondents indicate that Kazaks perceive Islam as an important attribute of their traditions and see its revival as part of their cultural revival and as a constitutive component of their national identity.

As we can see from the quotations above, in the case of Kazakhstan we need to differentiate attachment to religious rituals/traditions from religiosity. These quotations show how these religion-based rituals are perceived as elements of Kazak tradition. Ceremonies related to daily life rituals of marriage, death, circumcision, the celebration of religious feasts (Kurban ayt and Oraza ayt) are most commonly observed traditions. These were also observed during the Soviet period, although not always very openly and freely as previously mentioned. In fact the characteristic of the Soviet period was such that people were both observing traditional rituals, celebrating traditional feasts, and celebrating secular Soviet holidays or certain Russian rituals transformed into Soviet rituals such as New Year or birthday celebrations. With independence, however, Soviet holidays were replaced by the national holidays of the newly emerged independent Republic of Kazakhstan, and as stated by all the interviewees, all religious feasts and rituals began to be practiced openly and freely. It would not be wrong to argue that Islam as part of the national identity is used as an element that differentiates Kazaks from Russians, but in fact this was a reaction against the Soviet regimes' anti-religious policy and oppression rather than a reaction to the Russians of Kazakhstan. This also explains why the former communist Nursultan Nazarbayev, who declared himself an atheist during the Soviet period, redefined himself as a believer and made the pilgrimage to Mecca when he became the president of Independent Kazakhstan.

An important point that was raised by a significant number of the respondents is the way the Russians perceived the Kazaks during the Soviet period. This was in fact a continuation of the perception developed during the expansion of the Russian Empire. A number of respondents have used the word 'shame' to define the feelings of most Kazaks about their culture during the Soviet period, because it was looked down on by the Russians. Interviewees in Atirau emphasized this view and the attitude of Russians during the Soviet period as expressed in the following quotations,

"According to what my grandmother said, the Russians were looking down on the Kazaks during the Soviet period. She said that they were trying to make the Kazak nation disappear. That is why the practice of all traditions was forbidden. Even during the weddings, most Kazak traditions were practiced in secrecy not to even mention religion" (Female, 20).

"Russians believe that they are superior to us. Since quite a long time they believe that they have been the greatest of all nations. They passed on these views from generation to generation. Kazakhstan and some other countries are providers of raw materials for Russia. They looked down on us. They perceive us as an uncivilized nation. They

view themselves as more clever, more civilized, more developed and more modern than us" (Female, 33, Teacher).

"Russians were looking down on us. They were perceiving the Kazak language as useless. Those who were not speaking Russian could not find a good job. We were ashamed of being Kazak because we could not preserve our language" (Male, 55, Doctor).

"During the Soviet period our culture was oppressed. We used to behave according to the instructions coming from above. After the independence our culture revived. People gained self-confidence. Now our writers and musicians express themselves freely. Most foreign countries respect our art and culture" (Male, 42, Engineer).

The last person quoted also mentioned during the interview that people were ashamed of not speaking Russian during the Soviet period, while they were ashamed to speak in Kazak because it was perceived as a 'primitive' language by the Russians.

During the interview, a teacher from Astana said,

"When I was a child, I remember that everyone was speaking Russian and they had Russian names. Once my grandmother called me and said 'come home Aliya'. I replied 'I do not want to be Aliya, I want to be Natasha'. In the past they were insulting us because of our Kazakness. I have been very sensitive to this issue since my childhood. Outside, and in buses, it was shameful to speak in Kazak. We preferred not to speak Kazak because we were ashamed of speaking our language" (Female, 43).

One of the respondents in Astana stated, "Russians think that we are hospitable people. I think that they also believe that we are lazy and not very hardworking people" (Male, 36). Another one said, "Russians think that we are uncivilized steppe people. They look down on us. They belittle us on all levels, in education, in civilization, in culture and in life standard" (Female, 20).

Crowe refers to Hilda Eitzen, who has pointed out in her article that Russians have always regarded the nomadic Kazaks as inferior barbarians and never understood the deeper meaning of the Kazak tribal culture (Crowe, 1998: 396). This view is supported by the collected data, as we can see from the quotations above. The fieldwork also indicated a change of attitude among the Russians of Kazakhstan towards Kazaks. Some of the respondents have mentioned this change. A Saleswoman from Almaty said,

"The attitude of Russians is a bit different now compared to the Soviet period. At that time, they thought of themselves as members of the upper class. Everything was Russified and there was little room for our own national or religious celebrations, and for our language and culture. After independence, however, they changed. I do not know how to explain this but they started to behave in a more respectful way and became more gentle" (Female, 45).

Conclusion

The nature of Islam in Kazakhstan as explained above is one of the most important obstacles impeding radical movements and fundamentalist Islam. In addition to that, the difference that exists between Kazakhstan (also Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan) and Uzbekistan and Tajikistan based on the classical settled-nomadic dilemma constitutes another obstacle to the spread of fundamentalism. The nomadic tradition is relatively late in conversion to Islam and thus the influence of pre-Islamic practices is still comparatively strong. Another important factor is, of course, the impact of the Soviet regime.

Based on the collected data, it would not be wrong to argue that the secular policies of the regime have taken roots in Kazakhstan. The last important factor that constitutes another obstacle to the development of radical Islam is the presence of Russians in the Kazak Steppes for centuries, which entailed the development of a certain way of cohabitation between Russians and Kazaks and thus a hybrid culture. The actual presence of Russians in Kazakhstan requires the continuation of the secular regime, especially considering that Russians have taken root and are a part of the Kazak nation.

In Kazakhstan, the cleavage is not only between Russians and Kazaks, but also between Uzbeks and Kazaks. It is essential to note that radical movements in Central Asia in general and in Kazakhstan in particular, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Hizb-ut-Tahrir, the Islamic Renaissance Party, or the leading figures of official Islam are mostly ethnic Uzbeks. This is a sort of proof to what has been argued above. We need to realize that Islam is not an umbrella identity in Central Asia, as is pointed out by some authors such as Nazpary (2002:171-174). Furthermore it is not even an umbrella within Kazakhstan.

Moreover, the fieldwork indicated that Islam is perceived as a cultural phenomenon rather than a religious one and is closely identified with national identity. Within this understanding, the Islamic revival in Kazakhstan is a component of the attempt to create a national identity, a reaction to the domination of the Soviet culture, which had the objective of eliminating religion in order to construct a common Soviet culture, and further presented nomadism and Islam as the most backward of ways of living, rather than being a spiritual search. While the term "nationalism" is perceived by Kazaks as loyalty to traditions and culture, including Islam, the term "believer" refers to self-identification with traditional Islam rather than Islamic fundamentalism. Nationalism and national identity in Kazakhstan combine varying religious and secular components. As argued by Poujol, the post-perestoika period permitted the utilization of Islam as an identity marker structuring the national claims about sovereignty and independence (2001: 47).

The new Kazak political power attempted to fill the vacuum left by the Soviet ideology at the beginning of the period of Perestroika through promoting ethical values within an atmosphere of insecurity. In other words, the careful promotion of religion that is under strict control of the government plays two significant roles: firstly, it fills the ideological and moral vacuum as a result of the disappearance of the Soviet system causing an important environment of insecurity, and secondly, it offered people an alternative to political parties that based their activities and projects on political Islam being in complete harmony with the position of the government (Poujol, 2000: 118). Although the tolerant Islam of Kazaks is sponsored by the state against fundamentalist Islam coming from abroad (Laruelle and Peyrouse, 2004: 185-193), it is not possible to argue that the danger of radical Islam does not exist considering the impact of global forces competing in the "religious field" for different purposes. The prevention of Islamic radicalism and the development of democracy in Kazakhstan will be strongly influenced by the nature of the economic restructuring and the distribution of wealth among all the different social and ethnic groups.

Another point that is necessary to consider is the hostility towards Islam that has developed in the West over the centuries, which has resulted in a simplistic approach to Islam that prevents the grasp of varieties in Islam and different types of religiosity. This simplistic approach entails in certain cases the failure of competing forces of the "religious field" since they overlook the complexities of historical heritage, local politics, and

clan and ethnic networks.

Considering both the perception of Islam by Kazaks and the way it is used in the construction of national identity by the political elite, it is possible to conclude by saying that there will be no room for radical Islam in Kazakhstan. Although it is a strong element of the national identity, having being influenced by pre-Islamic practices and the secular Soviet Regime, the influence of Islam in daily life will remain symbolic, traditional, hybrid, and nationalist in nature. It is also argued that the newly independent republic of Kazakhstan, in need of gathering new symbols and cultural elements aiming at constructing a national identity and its common values, will continue to use Islam as an important cultural element through attributing it as a symbolic power rather than a radical and fundamentalist force. Islam in Kazakhstan is more tradition than faith, as can be seen from the state ideology, which encourages Islam as traditions and bans to some extent Islam as faith.

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