

REASSESSING THE BARRIERS TO ISLAMIC RADICALIZATION IN KAZAKHSTAN

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Central Asia is one of the most complex and underassessed regions in the world and has been experiencing an exacerbation or activation of radical Islamic movements over the last decade or so. To some extent, extremism has shown its various facets in all Central Asian states.

The general overviews listing the roots of the Islamic radicalization usually explain it by several combined factors. These complex processes include increasing urbanization, institutional and individual corruption, the growing gap between rich and poor, the inability of the state to provide security, corruption in the law enforcement agencies, poor functioning of the state religious bodies, inefficient power structures, and limited scope for citizens to influence decisionmaking resulting in lower trust in the authorities, as well as other factors. The authoritarian regimes of Central Asia gave rise to boiling anger and discontent among their populations. For people unable to defend their rights and interests, religion may be viewed as an escape from their minimized existence. However, all those factors described were more or less present much earlier. Even more paradoxically, the extent of the Islamic radicalization taking place at that point did not occur while the Taliban was in power in Afghanistan.

Kazakhstan, being the most stable and safe country in the region, witnessed a series of alleged extremist-terrorist acts since 2011. The number of Islamic activists has grown, particularly in rural areas. As an official response to that, Kazakhstan continues to improve its legislation on combating terrorism and extremism. However, since this experience of domestic “political violence” in 2011-12, the country has suffered no major incidents.

This analysis begins by providing an overview of historic roots and identity of “Kazakh Islam” while attempting to explain how it emerged. Then it describes the nature of connection and influence reaching Kazakhstan from neighboring North Caucasus and Afghanistan and how it affects radicalization of the youth. Then main reasons for misleading assumptions are closely looked upon to identify how Kazakhstan is viewed from the outside world. Separate sections explore the state structures and the role of the state overseeing the issues regarding Islam and its practices. Special attention is drawn upon banned extremist groups, their specifics, and the country’s experience of political violence in 2011-12, as well as the state’s response to the acts of violence.

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