

The Politics of Multiple Religious Identity in Kazakhstan: Navigating Between State Secularism and Syncretic Tradition

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Abstract

Kazakhstan constitutes a theoretically significant case for the comparative study of religion and politics: a constitutionally secular polity in which most of the population maintains a Muslim ethno-cultural identity, yet in which religious observance diverges markedly from formal affiliation and pre-Islamic cosmological traditions continue to exert discernible influence on contemporary spiritual life. The present study investigates how the country's deeply syncretic religious heritage – integrating Tengrist cosmology, Sufi mysticism, and Soviet secular socialization – shapes contemporary political dynamics, state-religion relations, and governance strategies. Through systematic historical analysis and engagement with recent survey data and policy documentation, the article advances three principal arguments: first, that Kazakhstan's religious landscape is defined by a distinctive form of nominal or ethnic Islam that coexists in productive tension with secular institutional arrangements and residual pre-Islamic traditions; second, that this configuration of multiple religious identities, rather than constituting a straightforward threat to political order, functions simultaneously as a cultural resource for national identity construction and as a governance challenge requiring ongoing state management; and third, that the state's strategic promotion of “traditional” Hanafi Islam as an authenticating national symbol, combined with firm institutional secularism, represents a calculated effort to equilibrate national cohesion, political stability, and constitutionally guaranteed religious freedom..

Keywords: *Kazakhstan, Religious identity, Political Islam, State secularism, Syncretism, State-religion relations, Central Asia, Post-Soviet governance.*

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Introduction

The Republic of Kazakhstan presents a paradox that challenges conventional frameworks in the comparative politics of religion: it is a constitutionally secular state whose population is numerically and symbolically Muslim, yet whose citizens practice religion in ways that resist simple categorization as either devotional orthodoxy or thoroughgoing secularism. The simultaneous adherence, in varying degrees and forms, to Islamic belief, pre-Islamic Tengrist traditions, and Soviet secular values – a configuration designated here as multiple religious identity – carries profound implications for political stability, national identity formation, and the practical governance of a heterogeneous society in the post-Soviet era (Assyltayeva et al., 2024; Gerfanova et al., 2025; Zabirowa et al., 2025).

For this study, multiple religious identities are understood as a socially and historically constituted configuration in which a single individual or community simultaneously draws orientation, meaning, and belonging from more than one religious or quasi-religious tradition – traditions that may differ in their cosmological premises, ritual requirements, and institutional affiliations. In the Kazakhstani context, this concept operationalizes the empirically observable coexistence of Tengrist cosmological residues (animism, veneration of natural forces, shamanistic healing practices), Sufi-inflected Islamic beliefs and rituals, and patterns of secular socialization inherited from the Soviet period. The term does not imply cognitive contradiction or necessary doctrinal synthesis; rather, it describes a field of overlapping orientations whose relative salience varies by context, generation, and social position. This operational definition guides the selection of analytical categories, the interpretation of survey evidence, and the assessment of state policy throughout the article.

Unlike numerous Muslim-majority polities in which Islam occupies a structurally central role in legal frameworks and political discourse, Kazakhstan has maintained a model characterized by active secularism: the state not only remains neutral toward religion but also actively regulates its institutional expression while formally endorsing its cultural significance (Cornell et al., 2018). This governance posture coexists with discernible increases in religiosity among particular social segments – most notably younger cohorts – alongside state-led programs that incorporate “traditional” Islamic heritage into nationally validated identity narratives. The resulting configuration has been described as a “distinctive model of state-religious relations integrating

secular governance with recognition of Islam's historical and cultural significance” (Zhandossova et al., 2025).

The present article addresses a substantive gap in the comparative political science literature by examining how the multiplicity of religious identities in Kazakhstan simultaneously constitutes a political resource and a governance liability within a secular constitutional framework. The guiding research question is: How does the coexistence of plural religious identity configurations in Kazakhstan shape political dynamics, and through what institutional and discursive strategies does the state seek to manage this complexity while preserving the secular constitutional order? This overarching question disaggregates into four analytically distinct sub-problems that structure the inquiry: (1) What are the historical mechanisms through which Kazakhstan's layered religious identity configuration – Tengrist, Sufi-Islamic, and Soviet-secular – was produced, and how do these strata interact in the contemporary period? (2) What political functions does the state's discursive distinction between “traditional” and “foreign” Islam perform, and what are its structural limitations? (3) How do urban–rural, generational, and doctrinal cleavages in religious orientation generate differentiated governance challenges? (4) What are the long-term structural vulnerabilities of Kazakhstan's managed pluralism model in the context of demographic change, digital communication, and transnational religious flows?

The article is organized as follows. The theoretical framework section develops the conceptual apparatus – multiple religious identity, post-Soviet secularism, and syncretism as political resources – with explicit attention to the relationships among these three perspectives. The methodology section specifies the interpretivist-constructivist epistemological position, the process-tracing and discourse analysis procedures, and the data sources. The results section reports historical, discursive, and socio-political findings in systematic correspondence with the four sub-problems identified above. The discussion section interprets these findings in dialogue with the existing literature. The conclusion synthesizes the analytical contributions and identifies directions for future research.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical architecture of this study rests on three conceptual pillars whose analytical utility is individually established and whose mutual interrelation is argued to be constitutive rather than merely additive: they are not independent lenses that happen to illuminate different aspects of the same phenomenon, but rather components of a single explanatory logic in which each presupposes

and conditions the others. Multiple religious identity is the empirical phenomenon to be explained; post-Soviet secularism designates the institutional context within which that phenomenon takes political form; and syncretism, as a political resource, describes the mechanism through which state actors strategically engage with religious plurality. Understanding how the Kazakhstani state manages religious identity multiplicity requires simultaneous attention to all three dimensions, because the political functions of syncretic identity cannot be assessed independently of the institutional secular framework that both enables and constrains its mobilization.

Multiple Religious Identity as a Political Phenomenon

The concept of multiple religious identity poses a direct challenge to the assumptions that have historically underpinned political science treatments of religion as a singular, bounded, and internally coherent category of political allegiance and collective identity. In the Kazakhstani context, religious identity operates concurrently across several analytically distinct registers: as an ethnic marker differentiating Kazakhs from Slavic populations; as cultural heritage valorized in national narratives; as personal spirituality expressed through varying degrees of private observance; and as a political symbol mobilized by state and non-state actors alike. This multiplicity reflects what Privratsky (2001) characterized as the “syncretic essence” of Islam in the region, wherein Islamic beliefs and ritual practices were progressively amalgamated with pre-Islamic shamanistic, Zoroastrian, and Tengrian cosmological frameworks.

From a political perspective, multiple religious identities engender both opportunities and liabilities for state governance. On one hand, religious syncretism may function as a moderating force, attenuating exclusive confessional claims and enabling coexistence among faith communities with divergent theological commitments. On the other hand, the inherent ambiguity of syncretic religious boundaries can generate uncertainty regarding the legitimate scope of religious expression in public life and complicate institutional efforts to regulate, sanction, or prohibit specific forms of religious practice. It is this dual character – simultaneously stabilizing and destabilizing – that renders multiple religious identity analytically productive as a category and that motivates the second conceptual pillar: the specific institutional form of post-Soviet secularism within which this duality is politically managed.

The political salience of multiple religious identities is especially pronounced in post-colonial and post-Soviet contexts, where state actors must simultaneously undertake national identity construction, sustain secular governance architectures, and respond to endogenous religious

revival movements that may challenge both. As Malik (2021) observes in a broader comparative analysis, Kazakhstan exemplifies a “duality in the stance of government regarding religiosity”, wherein official discourse ostensibly endorses Islamic cultural revival while simultaneously constraining its political manifestations.

Post-Soviet Secularism: Active Regulation Rather Than Neutral Separation

For this study, post-Soviet secularism is operationally defined along three observable dimensions: (a) the constitutional and legal entrenchment of freedom of conscience alongside the formal separation of religious institutions from organs of state administration; (b) the retention and active exercise of regulatory authority over the registration, public visibility, and permissible content of religious practice, including licensing of clergy, approval of religious literature, and restrictions on unregistered worship; and (c) the selective incorporation of religious heritage into state-sponsored cultural, educational, and commemorative programming. A given policy, legal provision, or discursive act is classified in this study as an instance of post-Soviet secularism to the extent that it can be coded against one or more of these three dimensions. This operationalization distinguishes post-Soviet secularism analytically from both the “hostile” Soviet model, which lacked dimension (c), and from liberal-neutral models of church–state separation, which generally lack the active regulatory posture described in dimension (b). The three-dimensional structure encompasses, respectively, the legal-constitutional analysis in the historical subsection, the discourse-analytical coding of regulatory measures presented in Table 3, and the assessment of state instruments in Table 7.

Kazakhstan's model of secularism differs in important respects from both the liberal neutrality framework associated with Anglo-American political philosophy and the strict *laïcité* of the French Republican tradition. Cornell et al. (2018) locate Kazakhstan's approach on a continuum between neutral accommodation and what they term an “insulating” or skeptical model, in which the state actively deploys regulatory authority to limit the institutional reach of religious actors. This active secularism inherited the Soviet legacy of state-directed atheism while reconfiguring it to permit controlled religious expression rather than pursuing its elimination. The concept of post-Soviet secularism thus provides the institutional scaffolding within which the political consequences of multiple religious identity – identified in the previous section – are concretely mediated: it is because the Kazakhstani state is both secular and active in its regulation that religious multiplicity generates the combination of opportunity and governance challenge documented in this study.

Three interrelated political functions characterize this form of secularism. First, it serves as a mechanism for governing ethnic plurality by preventing any single confessional community from attaining hegemonic status in the political sphere. Second, it provides ideological justification for state intervention in religious affairs, particularly regarding “foreign” or “non-traditional” influences perceived as threatening the coherence of the national religious field. Third, it enables the selective incorporation of religious symbolism into state-sponsored national identity projects while maintaining the formal primacy of secular legal norms. These functions directly create the political space within which syncretism can be instrumentalized as a governance resource – the third pillar of the framework.

Critically, contemporary Kazakhstani secularism diverges from its Soviet predecessor in a significant respect: whereas Soviet state atheism sought the eradication of religious belief as such, post-independence secularism accepts religious identity as a socially legitimate cultural reality while insisting on the legal and political primacy of the secular constitutional order. President Tokayev's characterization of secularism as connoting “pragmatism, commitment to a healthy lifestyle, reverence for our traditional religion, and preservation of national consciousness” (U.S. Department of State, 2023) frames it explicitly as compatible with – rather than antithetical to – religious heritage. This formulation would have been inconceivable under Soviet rule.

Syncretism as Political Resource

For this study, syncretism as political resource is operationally defined as the deliberate state-led selection, recombination, and public valorization of elements drawn from Kazakhstan's historically layered religious heritage – Tengrist cosmological motifs, Sufi shrine veneration and hagiography, and Hanafi juridical affiliation – for legitimating state authority, constructing officially sanctioned national identity narratives, and demarcating an “authentic” national Islam from religious orientations classified as “foreign”. Empirically, this concept is operationalized through three observable indicators that are tracked throughout the results section:

- (1) the designation of syncretic religious sites, practices, and figures as components of officially supported heritage programs;
- (2) the discursive pairing of “traditional” and “foreign” categories of Islam in presidential and legislative texts, as coded in Step 3 of the discourse analysis protocol;
- (3) the institutional mandate granted to state-aligned religious bodies, principally the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan (SAMK), to certify which forms of religious practice

qualify as “traditional”. A finding is interpreted as evidence of syncretism functioning as a political resource only where at least one of these three indicators is documented in the primary source material.

The syncretic character of Kazakhstani religious identity – integrating Tengrist cosmology, Sufi mysticism, and the textual traditions of Hanafi jurisprudence – constitutes the political resource that state actors deploy within the secular institutional framework to manage the governance challenges generated by multiple religious identities. The logical sequence is therefore: multiple religious identity creates both cultural resources and governance liabilities; post-Soviet secularism provides the institutional framework that both empowers state intervention and sets its boundaries; and syncretism as a political resource describes the specific content of state strategy – namely, the selective valorization of historically layered religious heritage to construct a nationally bounded form of Islam compatible with secular governance. Each pillar presupposes the others: syncretism is politically usable precisely because it is multiple (first pillar) and because the state has the institutional authority to define its “authentic” forms (second pillar).

The state has actively promoted this syncretism through policies emphasizing “traditional” Hanafi-Sufi Islam as an authentically Kazakhstani form of religiosity, while contrasting it with Islamic interpretations classified in official discourse as “foreign” or “non-traditional,” including some currents associated in that discourse with Salafi or Wahhabi orientations. This emphasis on culturally embedded religiosity is consistent with comparative research on religious harmonization in Muslim societies, which shows that cultural literacy, peace education, indigenous traditions, and local leadership can facilitate interreligious harmony without reducing religious plurality to a single politically privileged interpretation (Ruslan & Irham, 2022). This political deployment of syncretism is institutionalized through heritage programs such as “Sacred Geography of Kazakhstan”, launched in 2017 under the broader Rukhani Zhangyru modernization initiative, which frames historic mausoleums, Sufi shrines, and pilgrimage sites as constitutive elements of national history serving simultaneously spiritual and state-building functions.

Laruelle’s (2007) comparative analysis of post-Soviet “political Tengrism” supplies a useful point of contrast for specifying the form that this instrumentalization takes in the Kazakhstani case. Laruelle documents how, in Kyrgyzstan and Tatarstan especially, Tengrist ideologues have advanced pre-Islamic Turkic-Mongol cosmology as a candidate for a stand-alone, officially sanctioned national religion, with the Kazakhstani variant of this movement figuring in her account

as comparatively marginal. The pattern identified in the present study diverges from this trajectory. Rather than promoting Tengrism as an autonomous political-religious ideology, the Kazakhstani state subsumes Tengrist cosmological motifs within the broader narrative of “traditional” Hanafi-Sufi Islam, treating pre-Islamic heritage as a historical layer of national identity rather than as a candidate for independent institutional revival. This comparative distinction sharpens the article’s central claim regarding syncretism as a political resource: Kazakhstan’s strategy operates through integration into an Islamic idiom rather than through the construction of a parallel, explicitly non-Islamic national religion of the kind that Laruelle identifies elsewhere in the region.

Nevertheless, this instrumentalization of syncretic heritage confronts structural challenges. Younger, scripturally oriented Muslims – socialized increasingly through digital platforms and transnational Islamic networks rather than through locally embedded oral traditions – may reject syncretic practices as *bid'ah* (blameworthy innovation) incompatible with textually authoritative Islam. The resulting tension between “traditional” syncretism and “modern” scripturalist orthodoxy constitutes a significant political fault line with implications for generational alignment, urban–rural relations, and the state's capacity to sustain religious harmony through institutional management. These structural tensions are operationally traceable through the discourse analysis protocol and societal cleavage analysis reported in the results section

Methodology

Research Design and Epistemological Position

The methodological architecture of the present study is grounded in an interpretivist-constructivist epistemological position, which holds that religious and political phenomena cannot be adequately understood independently of the historically and socially constituted meanings that actors ascribe to them. From this perspective, “multiple religious identity” is not a natural empirical fact waiting to be measured but a configuration of meaning-laden orientations whose political significance is produced and reproduced through institutional arrangements, discursive practices, and social interaction. This epistemological commitment shapes every stage of the inquiry, from the selection of analytical categories to the mode of engagement with evidence and the form of theoretical generalization. More specifically, this study employs a constructivist qualitative approach, which means that the researcher’s interpretive perspective influences both the creation of analytical categories and the researcher's interaction with empirical evidence. Within this broader

constructivist framework, the study employs the logic of an explanatory case study – a design associated with Yin (2018) - where the goal is to explain the causal mechanisms and processes underlying an observed outcome, rather than merely describing its features. This approach is supplemented by critical discourse analysis as an additional analytical method. This approach sets the study apart from phenomenological designs, which focus on participants' personal experiences, and from grounded theory designs, which develop new conceptual categories through repetitive data coding; neither of these approaches fits the study's primary focus on analyzing documentary and secondary sources, as well as its emphasis on institutional and discursive mechanisms instead of individual lived experiences.

The study adopts a qualitative, theoretically informed single-case design. Kazakhstan is treated neither as a fully idiosyncratic case whose lessons are entirely context-bound nor as a straightforwardly representative instance of a larger population. Rather, it constitutes what Yin (2018) classifies as a “revelatory” case and what Gerring (2007) terms a “typical” case in the sense of being theoretically representative of a wider class of post-Soviet Muslim-majority secular states: its configuration of constitutional secularism, syncretic religious heritage, and Soviet institutional legacies illuminates theoretical relationships that remain underdeveloped in existing literature on religion-state dynamics. The single-case design is further justified by Stake's (1995) criterion of intrinsic significance: Kazakhstan is selected not as a vehicle for external generalization alone but because its religious governance dynamics warrant analysis. In terms of case study typology (Yin, 2018), this study is most accurately classified as an explanatory case study: it does not merely document what Kazakhstan's religious governance looks like (descriptive) or explore an underexamined phenomenon inductively (exploratory), but rather seeks to explain the causal and discursive mechanisms through which a specific political outcome – the state's managed pluralism strategy – was produced and is maintained. The explanatory design is operationalized through process-tracing and critical discourse analysis, which together reconstruct the historical and institutional pathways linking Kazakhstan's syncretic religious heritage to its contemporary governance challenges. The epistemological position adopted here follows Lincoln et al.'s (1985) naturalistic inquiry paradigm, in which the goal is to generate transferable theoretical propositions rather than statistical generalizations across a defined population.

Table 1*Overview of Research Design*

Design Dimension	Specification	Justification
Epistemological position	Interpretivist-constructivist	Religious and political meanings are socially constructed and historically contingent; their analysis requires interpretive, context-sensitive inquiry
Research approach	Qualitative, theoretically informed case study	Enables depth of contextual analysis not achievable through large-N comparative methods for a phenomenon of this structural complexity
Analytical strategy	Process-tracing combined with discourse analysis	Identifies causal mechanisms linking historical legacies, identity configurations, and state policy outcomes across time
Temporal scope	7th century CE – present (analytical emphasis on 1991-2024)	Longue durée historical framing is essential to understanding layered religious identities; post-1991 focus captures policy-relevant dynamics
Unit of analysis	The Kazakhstani state and its religious governance field	Encompasses state institutions, normative frameworks, political discourse, and societal responses as a coherent analytical object
Primary data sources	Presidential addresses, legislative texts, SAMK documentation, national religious freedom reports	Direct access to official discourse and regulatory architecture governing religion–state relations
Secondary data sources	Peer-reviewed scholarship, international organization reports, longitudinal survey datasets	Contextualizes primary sources within established scholarly debates and provides quantitative empirical benchmarks

Note. Research design dimensions are specified in accordance with conventions established in comparative qualitative methodology literature (George & Bennett, 2005; Gerring, 2007; Yin, 2018).

Analytical Strategy: Process-Tracing and Discourse Analysis

Two complementary analytical procedures are employed in combination. The first is process tracing, a method developed within comparative historical analysis for tracing the causal mechanisms and pathways by which initial conditions and intervening processes produce observable political outcomes (Beach & Pedersen, 2013; Mahoney, 2012). In the context of this study, process tracing is used to reconstruct the historically layered formation of Kazakhstan's multiple religious identity configuration – from pre-Islamic Tengrist cosmology through Sufi-mediated Islamization, Soviet-era institutional destruction, and post-independence re-traditionalization – and to establish how this layered heritage channels contemporary governance strategies and political dynamics. The technique enables the analysis to move beyond synchronic snapshot description toward a causally grounded account of why Kazakhstan's religious governance has assumed its present form rather than alternatives. The findings of this process-

tracing exercise are reported in the historical sub-section of the results, which addresses sub-problem (1) identified in the introduction.

Process tracing is complemented by critical discourse analysis (CDA), which is applied to the corpus of official state texts described in the following section. Discourse analysis proceeds on the premise that political language is not merely descriptive but constitutive: official characterizations of “traditional” versus “foreign” Islam, the semantic architecture of counter-extremism legislation, and presidential constructions of the relationship between secularism and national identity are themselves political acts that define the boundaries of legitimate religiosity, authorize state intervention, and shape public understanding of the religious field (Fairclough, 2013; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). The results of this discourse analysis are reported in the sub-section addressing sub-problem (2). These two analytical procedures are mutually reinforcing rather than parallel: process-tracing furnishes the causal-historical scaffolding within which discourse-analytical findings are interpreted, while discourse analysis provides access to the normative and symbolic register through which political actors construct and contest the meaning of religious identity. The integration of an explanatory case study with CDA is deliberate and methodologically coherent: the case study framework provides the overall research architecture – defining the unit of analysis, the sources of evidence, and the logic of analytical generalization – while CDA constitutes one of two within-case analytical procedures (alongside process-tracing) deployed to address specific sub-questions. This nested arrangement means that the two methods do not compete but operate at different levels of the inquiry: the case study determines what is being investigated and why, while process-tracing and CDA determine how the evidence within the case is analyzed. The primacy of the case study design is reflected in Table 1 (Research Design Overview), which situates both analytical procedures as instruments within a single explanatory case study architecture.

Data Sources, Selection Criteria, and Source Evaluation

The empirical foundation of the study rests on a purposively assembled corpus of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources comprise official state documents, including presidential State of the Nation addresses from 1997 to 2022, the foundational legislation governing religious activity and its successive amendments, and documentation produced by SAMK. Secondary sources encompass peer-reviewed monographs and journal articles, international religious freedom assessments, longitudinal survey datasets, and historical and ethnographic scholarship.

Table 2 presents the typology of sources used, with representative examples and an evaluation of each category's analytical function and principal limitations.

Table 2

Typology of Data Sources, Analytical Functions, and Limitations

Source Category	Representative Examples	Analytical Function	Limitations Addressed
Official state documents	Presidential addresses (1997-2022); Law on Religious Activity (2011, amended 2015); SAMK regulatory circulars	Primary evidence for official discourse, policy intent, and institutional architecture	Potential strategic self-presentation mitigated by cross-referencing with civil society and international sources
Peer-reviewed monographs and journal articles	Privratsky (2001); Cornell et al. (2018); Karimov et al. (2024); Junisbai et al. (2017); Zhandossova et al. (2025)	Theoretical framing, empirical benchmarks, scholarly interpretation of historical and contemporary processes	Selective emphasis in individual works addressed through comparative engagement across methodologically diverse scholarship
International religious freedom reports	U.S. Department of State Annual Reports on International Religious Freedom: Kazakhstan (2015-2023)	Independent assessment of restrictions on religious practice, discrimination, and legislative changes	Geopolitical perspective of producing institution noted; findings triangulated with academic literature
Independent civil society and human rights monitoring sources	Forum 18 News Service prosecution monitoring (2021-2024); Freedom House (2023) and Human Rights Watch (2025) country reports on Kazakhstan; Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law (KIBHR) documentation (2023)	Independent, non-state verification of enforcement practice and of the gap between official discourse and institutional behavior, drawing on organizations operating outside, and in the case of KIBHR partly within, the Kazakhstani state apparatus	Advocacy-oriented framing acknowledged and addressed through cross-referencing with official statistics, academic literature, and the U.S. State Department assessments already incorporated in the corpus
Longitudinal survey datasets	ARDA Kazakhstan Religious Affiliation (2020); Pew Research Center (2012); nationally representative surveys cited in Junisbai et al. (2017)	Quantification of trends in religious self-identification, practice frequency, and generational variation	Survey-reported religiosity may diverge from observed behaviour; methodological notes reviewed for each dataset
Historical and ethnographic scholarship	DeWeese (1994); Keller (2001); Ro'i (2000); Laruelle (2007)	Reconstruction of pre-Islamic, Islamic, and Soviet-era religious developments foundational to the <i>longue durée</i> analytical frame	Temporal distance from contemporary dynamics; addressed by combining with current policy and survey sources

Note. Source selection followed a purposive sampling logic: all included sources were assessed as contributing nonredundant analytical value. Temporal coverage of primary sources: 1997-2024. Secondary sources drawn from scholarship published between 1994 and 2025.

Discourse Analysis Protocol

The discourse-analytical component of the study follows a systematic five-step protocol applied to the assembled corpus of official texts. The procedure is detailed in Table 3. The five steps – corpus delimitation, semantic field mapping, framing analysis, diachronic comparison, and triangulation – are applied in the sequence described, and their results are reported correspondingly in the findings sub-section on security governance and discursive framing.

Table 3.

Discourse Analysis Protocol: Steps, Procedures, and Illustrative Applications

Analytical Step	Procedure	Illustrative Application
Step 1: Corpus delimitation	Identification of all presidential addresses, legislative preambles, and Muftiate official statements (1997–2022) available in publicly accessible repositories	26 annual State of the Nation addresses; 3 major religious governance laws and their explanatory memoranda
Step 2: Semantic field mapping	Systematic frequency analysis of lexical clusters: security terminology (“extremism”, “terrorism”, “radicalism”) versus religiously specific terminology (“Muslim”, “Islamic”, “mosque”)	89 occurrences of security-adjacent terms versus 19 occurrences of Muslim-referential terms across 25-year corpus – revealing deliberate semantic decoupling strategy
Step 3: Framing analysis	Identification of dominant conceptual frames structuring the construction of “traditional” versus “foreign” Islam and the relationship between secularism and national identity	Tokayev formulation of secularism as “pragmatism and reverence for traditional religion” – framing secular governance as religiously compatible rather than opposed
Step 4: Diachronic comparison	Tracing of shifts in official religious discourse across three identifiable phases: pre-2011 permissive pluralism; 2011–2016 reactive securitization; post-2016 institutionalized managed pluralism	Legislative trajectory from the 1992 Law on Freedom of Conscience to substantially more restrictive 2011 and 2015 amendments reflects a broader securitization process
Step 5: Triangulation	Cross-validation of discourse-analytical findings against survey-based religiosity data, international human rights assessments, and independent scholarly analyses	State claims of protecting “traditional” Islam assessed against reported employment discrimination against visibly observant Muslims in U.S. State Department reports

Note. Protocol developed in dialogue with Fairclough (2013) and Wodak & Meyer (2016). All lexical frequency counts were verified through independent re-reading of the source corpus. The table has been revised from four to five steps to incorporate the triangulation procedure as a formally designated analytical step, consistent with the reporting of triangulation results in the findings section.

Step 1 ensures that discourse-analytical claims are anchored to a defined and reproducible textual archive. Step 2 operationalizes the study's central theoretical claim about the political functions of state religious discourse through measurable lexical indicators; the finding – 89 security-adjacent occurrences versus 19 Muslim-referential occurrences – is reported and interpreted in the results. Step 3 captures the normative and symbolic register that frequency counting cannot access; the

Tokayev framing of secularism as religiously compatible is analyzed as a constitutive political act in the results section. Step 4 prevents the analytical flattening of temporal variation by identifying the three-phase trajectory of official discourse; this diachronic finding is integrated into the historical analysis. Step 5 maintains triangulation as a validity check against independent non-state sources; its implementation is documented throughout the results with references to U.S. State Department reports and independent survey data.

Methodological Correspondence between Sub-Research Questions and Analytical Procedures

The four sub-research questions that disaggregate the guiding research question are not addressed through a single undifferentiated procedure; rather, each sub-question is matched to the analytical procedure best suited to the nature of the evidence it requires, and the procedures are integrated through the triangulation step described above. Sub-problem (1), concerning the historical mechanisms underlying Kazakhstan's layered religious identity configuration, is addressed primarily through process-tracing of documentary and historiographical sources spanning the pre-Islamic, Islamic, Soviet, and post-Soviet periods; this procedure is appropriate because the sub-question concerns the sequencing and causal interaction of long-term historical processes rather than synchronic patterns. Sub-problem (2), concerning the political functions and limitations of the “traditional”/“foreign” Islam distinction, is addressed through critical discourse analysis of the official corpus described in Table 2, combining lexical frequency analysis with qualitative framing analysis; this procedure is appropriate because the sub-question concerns the construction of meaning in official political language rather than behavioral or attitudinal patterns. Sub-problem (3), concerning urban–rural, generational, and doctrinal cleavages, is addressed through secondary analysis of existing nationally representative survey datasets (Junisbai et al., 2017; ARDA, 2020; Zabirowa et al., 2025), interpreted through a cleavage-mapping framework adapted from comparative political sociology (Table 6); this procedure is appropriate because the sub-question concerns the distribution of religious orientations across social categories, a question that documentary and discourse-analytical methods alone cannot answer. Sub-problem (4), concerning the long-term structural vulnerabilities of the managed pluralism model, is addressed through a structured trend-extrapolation procedure that combines the historical trajectory reconstructed via process-tracing (sub-problem 1) with documented indicators of demographic composition, internet penetration, and transnational labor and religious mobility; this procedure is appropriate because the sub-question concerns prospective structural dynamics that cannot be directly observed in

either the historical or contemporary record and must instead be inferred from the intersection of established trends.

Although sub-problems (1) and (2) share a common documentary evidentiary base, they are addressed through distinct analytical operations – causal-sequential reconstruction in the former case and meaning-constitutive analysis in the latter – while sub-problems (3) and (4) introduce, respectively, a secondary-quantitative and a trend-extrapolative procedure that are methodologically independent of both process-tracing and discourse analysis. The study's analytical strategy is therefore multi-method rather than monolithic, with the choice of procedure in each case determined by the evidentiary character of the corresponding sub-question, and with triangulation (Step 5 of the discourse analysis protocol and the cross-referencing strategy specified in Table 2) serving as the integrative mechanism across procedures.

Methodological Limitations and Validity Considerations

Several methodological limitations constrain the scope and confidence of the study's findings. The exclusive reliance on documentary and secondary sources means that the lived experience of religious identity is accessible only through the mediation of survey aggregates and ethnographic scholarship conducted by other researchers at different points in time. A second limitation concerns the temporal unevenness of the evidence base: documentary and scholarly coverage of the post-2011 securitization period is substantially denser than coverage of the 1991-2010 re-traditionalization phase. Third, all official documentary sources were produced in Kazakh or Russian and were engaged through published English-language translations, with attendant risks of nuance loss for politically sensitive terminology. These limitations are addressed through a multi-strategy validity framework encompassing construct validity, internal validity, and bounded analytical generalizability.

Data collection

Data collection proceeded in two complementary streams corresponding to the study's dual analytical strategy of process-tracing and discourse analysis. The primary documentary corpus was assembled through systematic retrieval of presidential State of the Nation addresses for the period 1997-2022 from the official Akorda presidential administration repository, legislative texts governing religious activity (Laws of 1992, 2011 and 2015 with amendments) from the Kazakhstan Legal Information System (Adilet), and regulatory documentation issued by the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan (SAMK/Muftiate) available through its

official institutional channels. Selection was guided by purposive sampling logic: documents were included on the criterion of nonredundant analytical contribution to the inquiry's four sub-problems. Secondary data were collected through structured database searches in Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar using search strings combining the terms “Kazakhstan”, “Islam”, “secularism”, “religious identity”, “syncretism”, “Central Asia”, and “post-Soviet governance”, complemented by forward and backward citation tracing from foundational works (Privratsky, 2001; Cornell et al., 2018; DeWeese, 1994). Survey datasets were accessed via the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) platform along with the primary publications by Junisbai et al. (2017) and Zabirowa et al. (2025). International religious freedom assessments were retrieved from the U.S. Department of State's annual reporting series. The total corpus comprised 26 presidential addresses, 3 major legislative texts with associated memoranda, 4 SAMK regulatory circulars, 47 peer-reviewed scholarly works, 9 annual international religious freedom reports, and 3 longitudinal survey datasets. Data collection concluded in January 2026.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in two sequentially organized phases corresponding to the two analytical procedures described above. In the first phase, process-tracing analysis was applied to reconstruct the causal-historical mechanisms through which Kazakhstan's layered religious identity configuration was produced across six identifiable historical periods (Table 5). Following Beach and Pedersen's (2013) theory-testing variant of process-tracing, analytical attention was directed at identifying whether the observable historical evidence is consistent with the causal mechanisms proposed in the theoretical framework – specifically, the claim that successive religious traditions were incorporated into a stratified configuration rather than displaced by their successors. Evidence from historical and ethnographic scholarship (DeWeese, 1994; Privratsky, 2001; Keller, 2001; Ro'i, 2000) was evaluated against this theoretical expectation and assembled into the periodized narrative presented in the results section.

Theoretical Sampling and Case Justification

The selection of Kazakhstan as the singular object of sustained analytical attention is justified on grounds of theoretical salience rather than typicality or representativeness. Three characteristics render Kazakhstan particularly well-suited to illuminating the research question: its unusually high degree of visible religious layering; the structural tension between the demographic Muslim

majority and constitutional secular governance; and the relative availability of reliable documentary sources. Following the logic of analytical generalization (Yin, 2018; Gerring, 2007), the study seeks to develop and refine theoretical propositions that may subsequently be tested and qualified through comparative investigation across additional cases.

In the second phase, CDA was applied to the assembled primary documentary corpus following the five-step protocol detailed in Table 3. Step 2 Lexical frequency analysis was conducted through systematic close reading and manual tagging of all 26 presidential addresses, with occurrences of security-adjacent and Muslim-referential terms recorded in a dedicated coding register. Independent re-reading of a randomly selected sub-corpus (eight addresses, representing 30% of the corpus) was conducted to verify the frequency counts, yielding a concordance rate exceeding 95%, which is considered adequate for manual content analysis of this scope (Krippendorff, 2004). Framing analysis in Step 3 followed Entman's (1993) four-component model, identifying the problem definition, causal attribution, moral evaluation, and remedy recommendation operative in official constructions of “traditional” versus “foreign” Islam. Diachronic comparison in Step 4 segmented the corpus into three temporal phases based on identifiable legislative inflection points (1992, 2011, 2016) and traced shifts in the relative frequency and semantic orientation of key lexical clusters across these phases. Triangulation in Step 5 involved systematic cross-referencing of discourse-analytical findings against survey-reported religiosity data, international human rights assessments, and independent scholarly analyses, with instances of convergence and divergence recorded and assessed. Cutting across both analytical phases, a thematic analysis procedure was employed as an integrative sense-making technique to identify, organize, and interpret patterns of meaning across the heterogeneous documentary corpus (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis in this study proceeded through six stages: familiarization with the data corpus; generation of initial codes capturing analytically relevant features of texts; systematic search for recurring themes across codes; review and refinement of candidate themes against the full corpus; definition and naming of themes; and production of the written analytical narrative. In the context of the present study, thematic analysis served primarily to organize and label the substantive patterns identified through process-tracing and CDA – such as the “traditional”/“foreign” framing, the securitization of religious discourse, and the instrumentalization of syncretic heritage – into coherent interpretive categories that structure the findings and discussion sections. This procedure is consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2006) theoretical thematic analysis variant, in which the

analyst approaches the data with prior theoretical commitments that guide, without determining, the identification of thematically significant patterns.

Trustworthiness of data

The trustworthiness of the study's findings is evaluated through Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four-criterion framework of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, adapted to the specific methodological requirements of documentary and discourse analysis.

Credibility – the internal validity analog in interpretivist research – is established through three complementary procedures. Prolonged engagement with the documentary corpus, spanning systematic analysis of 26 presidential addresses over 25 years, provides the depth of immersion necessary to support credible interpretive claims. Methodological triangulation, implemented as Step 5 of the discourse analysis protocol, cross-validates findings derived from official state texts against independent sources, including peer-reviewed scholarship, survey datasets, and international human rights assessments. Member checking, while not applicable in its conventional ethnographic form, is approximated through engagement with the assessments of Kazakhstani-based scholars (Zabirova et al., 2025; Zhandossova et al., 2025; Karimov et al., 2024), whose situated knowledge of the governance context provides an external validity check on discourse-analytical interpretations derived by the present authors.

Transferability – the external validity analog – is addressed through thick description of the Kazakhstani case's institutional, historical, and cultural context, enabling readers and future researchers to assess the degree to which analytical findings apply to cognate cases in Central Asia or the broader post-Soviet Muslim-majority context. The study explicitly does not claim statistical generalizability; it pursues analytical generalization in Yin's (2018) sense, seeking to develop and refine theoretical propositions that may subsequently be tested comparatively.

Dependability – the reliability analog – is supported by the structured, multi-step discourse analysis protocol detailed in Table 3, which renders the analytical procedure transparent and, in principle, replicable. The coding register produced in Step 2 of the lexical frequency analysis, with independent rereading yielding a concordance rate exceeding 95%, provides a quantifiable indicator of analytical consistency.

Confirmability – the objectivity analog – is maintained through systematic reflexivity: the epistemological commitments, data selection criteria, analytical procedures, and known limitations of the study are made explicit throughout the methodology section, enabling readers to assess the

degree to which findings are grounded in evidence rather than in the researchers' pre-existing interpretive dispositions. The acknowledgment of limitations in the preceding sub-section constitutes a formal component of this confirmability strategy.

Results

The results are presented in systematic correspondence with the four sub-problems identified in the introduction. The first sub-section traces the historical mechanisms through which Kazakhstan's layered religious identity configuration – Tengrist, Sufi-Islamic, and Soviet-secular – was produced and examines how these strata interact in the contemporary period. The second sub-section reports the findings of the discourse analysis, addressing the political functions and structural limitations of the state's discursive boundary between “traditional” and “foreign” Islam. The third sub-section analyses how urban-rural, generational, class, and doctrinal cleavages in religious orientation generate differentiated governance challenges. The fourth sub-section identifies the long-term structural vulnerabilities of Kazakhstan's managed pluralism model amid demographic change, digital communication, and transnational religious flows. Taken together, these four sub-sections constitute the empirical foundation on which the interpretive claims advanced in the Discussion section rest.

Pre-Islamic Foundations: Tengrism and Shamanic Practice

The foundational layer of Kazakhstan's multiple religious identities lies in the pre-Islamic belief systems of Turkic nomadic peoples, most notably Tengrism – centered on the veneration of Tengri, the eternal blue sky, and Umay, the earth mother – and associated shamanistic practices. Tengrism provided a cosmological framework emphasizing harmony between human, natural, and cosmic realms, organized around cyclical renewal and animistic reverence for environmental forces. As the dominant spiritual tradition of nomadic societies, it notably lacked centralized ecclesiastical institutions or systematically elaborated dogmatic theology, privileging lived practice and experiential spiritual connection over doctrinal conformity. These structural features of the pre-Islamic religious field constitute the first element of the multiple-religious-identity configuration, whose later political consequences are traced in the subsequent sub-sections. The non-dogmatic, institutionally diffuse nature of Tengrism would prove decisive for the subsequent course of Islamization, as it created a field free of rigid institutional barriers and exclusive truth claims.

Islamization and the Sufi Synthesis (7th-14th Centuries)

The arrival of Islam in Kazakhstani territories was a gradual, geographically uneven, and socially differentiated process beginning in the 7th-8th centuries in the settled southern regions and extending over several centuries across the steppe. The nomadic population's slower and more selective acceptance of Islam produced what scholars characterize as a “particular system of religious synthesis” – a coexistence and interpenetration of Islamic and pre-Islamic elements that remained characteristic of the region's religiosity through subsequent centuries (Privratsky, 2001; DeWeese, 1994).

The political dimension of Islamization was structured critically by the differential effectiveness of its two principal vectors. The Arab military conquest introduced Islam to certain southern urban centers through coercive means. However, Sufi missionaries – particularly those associated with the Yasawiya order founded by Khoja Ahmad Yasawi (1103-1166/67) – proved substantially more effective at reaching nomadic populations. The Sufi pedagogical emphasis on personal spiritual experience and interiorized devotion rather than legalistic conformity resonated deeply with the existing Tengrist valorization of direct experiential connection to transcendent forces. Yasawi's own synthesis – invoking divine power through both Quranic and Tengrist formulae, addressing God simultaneously as “Kok Tangir” (the Blue Sky) and “Allah” – embodied the integrative logic that would define the region's religious formation and constitutes the historical foundation of the syncretic heritage that the contemporary state seeks to instrumentalize. This Sufi-mediated Islamization produced an Islamic identity that was culturally embedded and spiritually adaptive rather than juridically rigid (Privratsky, 2001; DeWeese, 1994). Crucially, Islamic identification remained socially stratified: stronger among urban populations and the nobility than among common nomads, many of whom continued to practice syncretism between Islamic and pre-Islamic traditions. This social stratification would subsequently influence differential responses to Soviet secularization and to the post-Soviet Islamic revival.

Soviet Secularization and the Privatization of Religion (1920s-1991)

The Soviet period constituted a fundamental political rupture for religious identity in Kazakhstan. Soviet state atheism – operating through what Cornell et al. (2018) characterize as a “hostile” model toward religion – pursued the systematic elimination of religious belief and its institutional infrastructure through mosque closure, persecution of religious scholars, and propagation of scientific materialism (Keller, 2001; Ro'i, 2000). While the campaign successfully dismantled

most formal religious institutions and dramatically curtailed public religious observance, it failed to extinguish religious identity as a cultural reality. Religious practice retreated into the domestic sphere, sustained primarily through life-cycle rituals that preserved Islamic identification even as theological literacy and daily observance declined sharply. This paradoxical outcome – secularization of institutions combined with persistence of ethnic-religious identity – is analytically significant: it produced the specific form of nominal Islam that the post-independence state would subsequently inherit and seek to manage. As Cornell et al. (2018) succinctly observe, “Soviet atheism failed to achieve its stated goal of abolishing religion; but it succeeded in secularizing the state” – a formulation that captures the structural legacy with which post-1991 governance has had to contend.

Post-Soviet Religious Revival and State Response (1991-Present)

Kazakhstan's independence in 1991 initiated what scholars term the “re-traditionalization” of Islam: a cultural and social reconnection with Islamic heritage, particularly pronounced among younger cohorts, emphasizing spiritual development, educational aspirations, and a sense of belonging to the community, while remaining formally compatible with secular governance. The state's policy response evolved through two discernible phases. An initial period of relative institutional permissiveness gave way, following terrorist attacks in 2011, 2012, and 2016 attributed to radical cells, including Jund al-Khilafah, to a substantially more restrictive regulatory environment. Legislative amendments restricted religious instruction for minors, curtailed foreign religious contacts, and expanded state oversight of unregistered religious activity, all legitimized through a security discourse emphasizing counter-extremism imperatives. Table 4 summarizes key quantitative indicators of Kazakhstan's contemporary religious landscape; Table 5 situates these configurations within the *longue durée* of religious identity formation.

Table 4.

Key Socio-Religious Indicators in Contemporary Kazakhstan

Indicator	Value / Statistic	Interpretive Significance
Self-identification as Muslim (ethnic Muslims)	~70% of total population	Confirms demographic Muslim majority within secular state
Regular mosque attendance among self-identified Muslims	~17% (ARDA 2020 wave; n ≈ 1,500 nationally representative sample; margin of error ±2.5 pp)	Indicates predominantly cultural rather than devotional practice; gap between nominal affiliation (~70%) and regular mosque attendance (~17%) constitutes a defining structural feature of Kazakhstan's religious landscape

Muslim self-identification among ethnic Kazakhs (2007)	79% (Junisbai et al., 2017; n = 1,500; ± 2.6 pp)	Baseline measure prior to post-Soviet religious revival acceleration
Muslim self-identification among ethnic Kazakhs (2012)	93% (Junisbai et al., 2017; n = 1,500; ± 2.6 pp)	Marked increase in nominal identification; the data indicate an upward trend across all adult age cohorts, with growth particularly visible in the 18–29 bracket, though cross-tabulated cohort-level data are required before attributing the aggregate shift exclusively to youth
Mosques operating in 1991	~170	Starting point of post-independence institutional religious revival
Presidential address references to extremism / terrorism / radicalism (1997–2022)	89 occurrences	Dominant security framing of religion in official discourse (Step 2 of discourse analysis protocol)
Presidential address references to Muslim-specific terms (1997–2022)	19 occurrences	Deliberate semantic decoupling of security threats from Islam as religion (Step 2 of discourse analysis protocol)

Note. The mosque attendance figure (~17%) is drawn from the ARDA 2020 survey wave, which reports a nationally representative sample of approximately 1,500 respondents, with a margin of error of ± 2.5 percentage points. Muslim self-identification figures for 2007 and 2012 are drawn from Junisbai et al. (2017), who report nationally representative samples of approximately 1,500 respondents per wave with a margin of error of ± 2.6 pp. The increase from 79% to 93% reflects an upward trend across adult age cohorts; the available cross-tabulated data indicate that growth was most pronounced in the 18–29 bracket, but the aggregate shift cannot be attributed exclusively to youth without a cohort-controlled longitudinal analysis. Presidential address frequency counts derive from corpus-level analysis conducted in Step 2 of the discourse analysis protocol (Table 3).

Table 5.

Historical Phases in the Evolution of Religious Identity in Kazakhstan

Historical Period	Dominant Religious Configuration	Political Implications
Pre-7th century	Tengrism and Shamanism	Decentralized governance: spiritual authority vested in shamans (baqsy); cosmological legitimation of khans
7th-14th centuries	Sufi-mediated Islamization	Gradual syncretic synthesis; Khoja Ahmad Yasawi tradition; limited legalistic rigidity among nomads
15th-19th centuries	Stratified Islamic identity	Urban elites more observant; rural nomads retain pre-Islamic practices; colonial Russian administration marginalizes religious authority
1920s-1991	Soviet state atheism	Institutional destruction; privatization of religion to life-cycle rituals; secularization of state structures

1991-2010	Post-independence religious revival	Controlled re-traditionalization; mosque proliferation; Islam as cultural national heritage
2011-present	Managed pluralism under security constraints	State-regulated Muftiate; distinction between “traditional” and “foreign” Islam; counter-extremism legislation

Note. Periodization is approximate. Boundaries between phases are porous and contested; overlapping processes of religious transmission and political transformation preclude sharp delineation.

Contemporary Political Dynamics: Managing Religious Identity Multiplicity

Step 1-2 Findings: Corpus Composition and Semantic Field Mapping

Consistent with Step 1 of the discourse analysis protocol, the assembled corpus comprises 26 annual State of the Nation addresses delivered between 1997 and 2022, together with the three major religious governance laws (1992, 2011, 2015) and their legislative memoranda, and a selection of SAMK regulatory circulars. Step 2 systematic lexical frequency analysis of this corpus yields an analytically decisive pattern: security-adjacent terminology – “extremism”, “terrorism”, “radicalism” and their derivations – appears 89 times, while Muslim-referential terms – “Muslim”, “Islamic”, “mosque”, “Quran” and their derivations – appear only 19 times. This asymmetry constitutes the empirical foundation of the central finding regarding the state's discursive strategy: religion is systematically framed through the lens of security rather than through theological or cultural registers, and the principal object of state concern is consistently constructed as extremism rather than as Islam per se.

Step 3 Finding: State Construction of “Traditional” versus “Foreign” Islam

Framing analysis (Step 3) reveals that the discursive boundary between “traditional” and “foreign” Islam is the dominant conceptual frame organizing official religious governance discourse. “Traditional” Islam is operationalized in state discourse as Hanafi Sunni Islam practiced in syncretic forms incorporating Sufi mysticism and pre-Islamic customary elements – an Islam understood as autochthonous, culturally embedded, and politically compatible with secular governance. This characterization encompasses practices such as visiting shrines associated with Sufi saints, veneration of the Yasawi tradition, and life-cycle ceremonial practices that blend Islamic and customary registers. The political utility of this construction is substantial: it endows the state with Islamic legitimacy by positioning it as a protector of authentic Kazakhstani spiritual

heritage, and it renders alternative Islamic movements categorizable as external to the state-sanctioned religious tradition and therefore subject to regulatory scrutiny.

Conversely, in official discourse, “foreign” Islam is defined less as a coherent theological category than as a label applied to Islamic interpretations perceived as external to Kazakhstan’s Hanafi-Sufi religious tradition, including some Salafi- or Wahhabi-associated currents, which state security discourse links to external ideological influences and potential radicalization risks. This distinction nonetheless faces structural challenges: younger, educated Muslims may find scripturalist orthodoxy more intellectually coherent than syncretic traditionalism, and the state’s own religious training infrastructure involves cooperation with Egypt’s Al-Azhar University, whose textual traditions are considerably more conservative than the Sufi-inflected syncretism officially promoted as “traditional”. The resulting contradictions in state religious policy indicate deeper tensions in managing a transnational religion within a nationally bounded governance framework.

Step 4 Finding: Diachronic Phases of Official Religious Discourse

Diachronic comparison (Step 4) identifies three analytically distinct phases in the trajectory of official religious governance discourse. The first phase (1992-2010) is characterized by relative permissiveness: a rapid proliferation of registered religious organizations, mosque construction, and Islamic educational initiatives, reflecting the re-traditionalization dynamic described in the historical sub-section. The second phase (2011-2016) constitutes reactive securitization: the legislative responses to the 2011-2016 terrorist incidents markedly tightened the regulatory framework, introducing restrictions on minors’ religious education, foreign religious contacts, and unregistered religious activity. Presidential addresses from this period show a significant elevation in the frequency of security-adjacent lexical clusters. The third phase (post-2016) represents institutionalized managed pluralism, in which security measures are consolidated but combined with cultural and educational programs – including the Rukhani Zhangyru initiative and the mandatory Grade 9 curriculum – that embed “traditional” Islamic heritage within a state-controlled identity framework.

Societal Cleavages in Religious Identity

The politics of religious identity in Kazakhstan intersect with constitutive social cleavages that generate complex patterns of alignment and tension, each corresponding to one of the governance challenges identified in sub-problem (3). Table 6 summarizes the principal dimensions of societal differentiation in religious orientation.

Table 6.*Societal Cleavages in Religious Identity Orientation in Kazakhstan*

Cleavage Dimension	Profile A	Profile B	Political Tension Point
Geographic (Urban–Rural)	Urban (Almaty, Astana): secular lifestyle, individualized piety	Rural (South Kazakhstan): higher observance, traditional practices	Spatial differentiation in religious governance expectations
Generational	Soviet-socialized: nominal “ethnic Islam”, secular orientation	Post-Soviet youth: increased devotional identification, digital Islam	Declining effectiveness of Soviet secular socialization as cohort effect
Class / Education	Professional elites: secular governance, economic integration	Economically marginalized: community and identity through religion	Risk of religious mobilization along lines of socioeconomic grievance
Doctrinal Orientation	“Traditional” Hanafi–Sufi syncretism	Scripturalist / reformist orientations, including Salafi-associated currents	State/Muftiate legitimacy challenged by alternative religious authorities

Note. Classifications represent idealized types drawn from survey research (Junisbai et al., 2017; Zabirowa et al., 2025) and ethnographic literature. Individual variation within categories is substantial.

Urban-rural differentiation is particularly salient. Metropolitan populations exhibit a more secular lifestyle orientation and individualized religious practice; rural populations, especially in historically more Islamized southern regions, demonstrate higher rates of observance and stronger attachment to communally practiced traditions. These geographic patterns generate distinct demands on the state's religious governance apparatus, requiring policies that are responsive to divergent constituency expectations while maintaining a nationally coherent framework.

Generational dynamics overlay these geographic patterns in analytically important ways. Cohorts shaped by Soviet socialization tend toward nominal Islam – maintaining Muslim identification as a cultural-ethnic fact while living substantially secular lives. Post-Soviet youth cohorts, lacking direct experience of Soviet atheistic socialization and accessing diverse Islamic discourse digitally, demonstrate significantly higher rates of devotional identification. Survey evidence registers this shift: self-identification as Muslim among ethnic Kazakhs increased from 79% in 2007 to 93% in 2012 (Junisbai et al., 2017; $n \approx 1,500$ per wave; ± 2.6 pp). The available aggregate data capture an upward trend across all adult cohorts; cross-tabulated analysis by age group indicates that growth was proportionally most visible in the 18–29 bracket, but the claim that the aggregate increase is

“concentrated among young people” cannot be established based on aggregate percentage shifts alone and requires cohort-controlled longitudinal analysis before it can be advanced with methodological rigor. This generational realignment need not translate into political Islam – the evidence suggests it more commonly reflects spiritual meaning-seeking amid a post-Soviet existential reorientation – but it does constrain the long-term sustainability of governance models premised on Soviet-era secular socialization. This interpretation is further supported by research on student-aged populations in Kazakhstan, which shows that internal religious orientation may be associated not with political radicalization but with empathy, charitable involvement, and social responsibility (Seminova et al., 2025).

Security Governance and the Discourse of Counter-Extremism

Security considerations have fundamentally conditioned the contemporary politics of religious identity in Kazakhstan since the terrorist attacks of 2011, 2012, and 2016. The Step 5 triangulation of discourse-analytical findings against independent sources confirms that the discursive strategy of de-Islamized security framing – documented through lexical frequency analysis in Step 2 – is operationally implemented through an expansive regulatory apparatus targeting specific forms of religious expression. U.S. Department of State (2023) reports document employment discrimination in the public sector against Muslims displaying visible markers of observance (headscarves, beards), indicating that the gap between official discourse and institutional practice is non-trivial.

This triangulation is strengthened by evidence from independent, non-state monitoring organizations operating both internationally and within Kazakhstan. Forum 18, a news service that documents religious freedom conditions across the post-Soviet space through direct reporting from within Kazakhstan, recorded an increase in administrative prosecutions for the exercise of freedom of religion or belief from 130 cases in 2021 to 144 in 2022 and to 203 in 2023 – a trajectory that runs counter to the institutionalized managed pluralism narrative associated with the post-2016 phase identified in Step 4 of the discourse analysis (Forum 18, 2024). The same source documents that a substantial share of these prosecutions concern the unregistered dissemination of religious materials, including via social media, rather than activities conventionally associated with security threats such as extremism or terrorism – a pattern that complicates the state's own framing of restrictive measures as narrowly targeted at security risks. Independently, Freedom House (2023) reports the continued detention since 2015 of dozens of members of the Sunni Tablighi Jamaat

movement, a group whose practices fall outside the “traditional” Hanafi-Sufi category promoted through the heritage programs discussed above, illustrating in concrete institutional terms the boundary-policing function that the discourse-analytical findings identify at the level of official language. Taken together, these independent sources corroborate the directionality of the legitimacy gap identified through comparison with U.S. Department of State reporting and indicate that the gap may be widening rather than narrowing during the post-2016 institutionalized managed pluralism phase.

This triangulation finding serves as a validity check on the state's claims to protect rather than constrain “authentic” Islam. Table 7 systematizes the principal institutional and discursive instruments through which the state manages its complex religious environment, together with the objectives pursued and the limitations encountered by each.

Table 7.

State Instruments for Managing Religious Identity in Kazakhstan

Policy Instrument	Mechanism	Objectives and Limitations
Spiritual Administration of Muslims (SAMK / Muftiate)	State-aligned institution defining “official Islam” and training clergy	Objective: control doctrinal content and curb radicalization. Limitation: perceived as inauthentic by segments of Muslim community
Sacred Geography of Kazakhstan (Rukhani Zhangyru, 2017)	Heritage program integrating shrines and mausoleums into national identity	Objective: deploy Sufi-syncretic heritage for nation-building. Limitation: scripturalist Muslims may reject shrine veneration as bid'ah
Mandatory “Secularism and Foundations of Religious Studies” curriculum (Grade 9, since 2016)	Formal education shaping religious literacy toward secular-compatible values	Objective: inoculate youth against radicalization. Limitation: top-down approach may lack resonance among digitally connected youth
Legislative restrictions on minors' religious instruction and foreign contacts	Regulatory framework curtailing non-state religious socialization	Objective: prevent foreign doctrinal influence. Limitation: potential violation of international religious freedom norms; alienation of observant families
Security discourse framing (extremism / terrorism terminology)	Presidential addresses and legislation employ de-Islamized security lexicon	Objective: allow enforcement without alienating Muslim majority. Limitation: overbroad application risks stigmatizing ordinary religiosity

Note. The assessment of objectives and limitations draws on Cornell et al. (2018), Zhandossova et al. (2025), Karimov et al. (2024), and the U.S. Department of State (2023).

The educational dimension of this governance model can also be interpreted in light of recent scholarship on Islamic legal literacy and religious moderation in digital contexts. Hermawan et al. (2025) demonstrate that digitally supported pedagogical models may strengthen contextual religious reasoning and moderate character formation. For Kazakhstan, this suggests that religious education policies may be more effective when they move beyond purely preventive security logic and instead cultivate interpretive literacy, contextual reasoning, and resilience among digitally connected youth.

Religious Identity and the Politics of National Identity Construction

The intersection of religious and national identity constitutes a particularly contested political terrain in Kazakhstan, where the state must construct a coherent national identity that integrates a multi-ethnic population while acknowledging the culturally salient Islamic heritage of the Kazakh ethnic majority. The state's response involves selective religious incorporation: Islamic heritage is formally recognized as a constituent element of national history and culture, with state patronage extended to historic mosques, mausoleums, and religious sites framed as cultural preservation. This incorporation is carefully bounded by the state's insistence on the legal primacy of secular norms: Islam is consistently framed in state discourse as cultural heritage and personal belief rather than as political principle or legal foundation.

This political configuration faces pressures from multiple constituencies simultaneously. Kazakh cultural nationalists may resent the multi-ethnic framing of national identity, preferring a more explicit alignment between Kazakh ethnicity and Islamic heritage. Minority populations may interpret selective Islamic symbolism as covert ethnic favoritism. Observant Muslims may experience the state's restrictions on public religious expression as disrespectful of their spiritual commitments. Navigating these competing pressures requires continuous political calibration and constitutes the structural dynamic underpinning sub-problem (3).

Structural Vulnerabilities and Future Challenges

The long-term sustainability of Kazakhstan's governance model faces challenges that operate across demographic, technological, and geopolitical dimensions, which are analytically traceable to the structural tensions identified in the theoretical framework and constitute the empirical content of sub-problem (4). Demographically, generational replacement means declining proportions of the population directly socialized under Soviet atheism. Labor migration to Gulf

states exposes workers to doctrinal environments markedly different from state-endorsed Hanafi-Sufi traditionalism. Technologically, the proliferation of internet access has fundamentally altered the ecology of religious knowledge and community formation, providing access to a vast spectrum of Islamic thought beyond the institutional reach of state-controlled religious authorities. At the geopolitical level, Kazakhstan's deepening integration into transnational economic and cultural circuits continues to connect its population to broader networks of the Islamic world, whose ideological flows complicate the state's management of religious discourse.

Discussion

The findings reported in the preceding section admit systematic interpretation in dialogue with the existing theoretical and empirical literature and in correspondence with the four sub-problems that structured the inquiry. Each finding is taken in turn, and its implications for broader scholarly debates are assessed.

The process-tracing analysis of Kazakhstan's historical religious formation – sub-problem (1) – demonstrates that the contemporary multiple-religious-identity configuration is not a historically accidental or transitional phenomenon but a structurally stable outcome of layered institutional processes spanning more than a millennium. This finding resonates with DeWeese's (1994) and Privratsky's (2001) foundational scholarship on syncretic Islamization in the region, which argued against the “thin veneer” thesis – the view that Islamic identity in Central Asia is a superficial cultural overlay that would eventually give way to either orthodox Islam or secular modernity. This analysis favors what could be called a sedimentation thesis. Each new religious tradition does not replace previous ones but rather integrates into a layered structure that preserves authentic elements from each. This theoretical refinement extends Privratsky's argument to the domain of contemporary governance. If syncretic layering is structurally stable, then governance strategies premised on its eventual erosion are likely to be systematically miscalibrated.

The discourse analysis findings addressing sub-problem (2) – the political functions and structural limitations of the “traditional” versus “foreign” Islam distinction – confirm and empirically specify the pattern identified by Cornell et al. (2018) as “active secularism”. The 89:19 ratio of security-adjacent to Muslim-referential lexical occurrences in presidential addresses represents a concrete, measurable operationalization of what Cornell et al. describe, at a more abstract level, as the state's deployment of regulatory authority without direct engagement with theological content. The

present study extends this finding by demonstrating, through Step 3 framing analysis, that the discursive strategy is not merely about avoiding religious engagement but about actively constructing a specific religious identity – syncretic Hanafi–Sufi “traditionalism” – as the authentic national version, thereby appropriating religious legitimacy while maintaining secular institutional primacy. This finding is consistent with Karimov et al.'s (2024) analysis of political Sufism but adds the discourse-analytical dimension that their sociological framework does not systematically develop.

The triangulation finding from Step 5 – evidence from U.S. Department of State (2023) reports of employment discrimination against visibly observant Muslims, set against state claims of protecting “traditional” Islam – identifies a legitimacy gap that the existing literature has noted in general terms (Cornell et al., 2018; Zhandossova et al., 2025) but not systematically documented through the combination of lexical analysis and independent cross-validation employed here. This corroboration is analytically important because it addresses a potential limitation of relying on a single category of independent source. At the same time, U.S. Department of State assessments might be suspected of reflecting a particular geopolitical perspective (as Table 2 acknowledges). The convergence of these assessments with reporting from civil society monitoring organizations operating independently of any single state's foreign policy apparatus – including organizations that maintain direct contact with affected religious communities inside Kazakhstan – substantially strengthens the evidentiary basis for the legitimacy-gap finding and brings the article's empirical claims closer to fulfilling its stated triangulation design. This gap is theoretically significant because it reveals that “managed pluralism”, as a governance strategy, is not simply a matter of institutional design but also depends on the credibility of state representations, which can be undermined when observable institutional behavior contradicts official discourse. This suggests that effective religious governance in authoritarian contexts requires both the construction of legitimate categories and their consistent enactment through institutional behavior.

The societal cleavage findings addressing sub-problem (3) elaborate the empirical picture sketched in Junisbai et al. (2017) and Zabirowa et al. (2025) by situating survey-reported trends within the theoretically structured framework of cleavage intersections. Junisbai et al.'s finding of increased Muslim self-identification between 2007 and 2012 is here analytically contextualized: the aggregate shift from 79% to 93% is real and significant, but attributing it specifically to youth requires cohort-controlled analysis that the available aggregate data do not support with sufficient

methodological rigor. This qualification is not merely a matter of methodological caution; it carries substantive implications for governance, because a generalized increase in nominal Islamic identification across all cohorts presents different policy challenges than a youth-specific trend in devotional intensity. The former suggests a broad cultural reorientation; the latter would suggest a more pointed challenge to the secular socialization model. The present analysis, therefore, calls for more disaggregated survey research as a priority for future scholarship.

Several of the findings reported above admit alternative explanations that the available evidence cannot fully adjudicate, and the epistemic status of the causal language used in this article warrants explicit clarification. Regarding the 89:19 asymmetry between security-adjacent and Muslim-referential terminology in presidential addresses (sub-problem 2), the interpretation advanced here – that this pattern reflects a deliberate strategy of semantic decoupling – competes with a more parsimonious alternative: that the prevalence of security-adjacent language simply reflects a realistic policy response to an objective increase in terrorism-related incidents after 2011, without any deliberate discursive strategy regarding the representation of Islam as such. These two interpretations are not mutually exclusive, and the available evidence does not permit a definitive choice between them. However, two features of the discourse-analytical findings render the purely reactive explanation incomplete on its own: first, the asymmetry is not confined to the immediate aftermath of the 2011-2016 incidents but persists, and according to the diachronic comparison (Step 4) intensifies, into the post-2016 period of institutionalized managed pluralism – a temporal pattern that a purely event-driven account would not predict; and second, the consistent pairing of security terminology with an affirmative “traditional Islam” framing (Step 3) suggests that the discursive function of security language extends beyond threat description to the positive construction of a legitimated religious category. The interpretation offered in this article should therefore be read as the more theoretically productive of two non-exclusive explanations rather than as the only explanation consistent with the evidence.

Regarding the increase in Muslim self-identification among ethnic Kazakhs from 79 percent in 2007 to 93 percent in 2012 (sub-problem 3), at least three explanations remain compatible with the aggregate survey data and cannot be disentangled without cohort-controlled longitudinal analysis: a genuine increase in religious belief and practice across the population; a measurement artifact arising from changes in survey administration, question wording, or sampling frame between the two waves; and a social-desirability effect, whereby respondents who previously

declined or hesitated to report a Muslim identity – owing to the residual influence of Soviet-era secular norms – became more willing to do so as public discourse increasingly normalized religious self-identification, independent of any underlying change in belief or practice. The present study cannot adjudicate among these explanations and explicitly flags this as an open empirical question rather than treating the aggregate increase as direct evidence of substantive religious revival.

More generally, the causal language employed throughout this article – including expressions such as “produces”, “shapes”, and “generates” – should be understood in the sense established by process-tracing methodology: as claims about the plausibility, sequencing, and mechanism-level coherence of a hypothesized causal pathway, supported by the demonstrated consistency between the temporal ordering of events and the documentary record, rather than as claims of statistically estimated causal effects or as claims that exclude all competing explanations. Where the evidence permits multiple plausible interpretations, as in the two cases discussed above, this article has sought to identify the interpretation most consistent with the full pattern of available evidence while explicitly acknowledging the alternatives that remain open.

The structural vulnerability analysis addressing sub-problem (4) extends and qualifies the comparative analysis advanced by Cornell et al. (2018) and Malik (2021). Both works identify Kazakhstan's secular model as relatively stable given its historical and institutional specificities, but neither systematically analyzes the digital transformation of religious knowledge ecology as a governance challenge. The present analysis argues that online platforms have fundamentally altered the balance of institutional authority by enabling the formation of religious identities and communities outside formally registered channels, thereby undermining the Muftiate's monopoly on doctrinal definition. This technological dimension represents a structural novelty that governance models developed in the pre-digital period do not adequately address. Comparative scholarship on Muslim-majority states in Southeast Asia and the Middle East that has begun to address digital Islam (e.g., Eickelman & Anderson, 2003, and subsequent literature) offers potentially transferable analytical frameworks. For example, Chakim's (2022) study of Indonesian youth demonstrates that online environments shape doctrine, religious practice, and political identity in ways that cannot be reduced to a simple moderate/radical binary, a finding that is particularly relevant to Kazakhstan's emerging digital religious field. However, the Central Asian institutional context requires careful attention to context-specific features.

Taken together, the findings suggest that the Kazakhstani model of managed religious pluralism is best characterized not as a stable equilibrium but as a dynamic tension structure that requires continuous institutional adaptation. The state's capacity to navigate this tension depends on three conditions that the present analysis identifies as simultaneously present and structurally vulnerable: the cultural resonance of syncretic “traditional” Islam as a legitimate religious identity; the institutional effectiveness of the Muftiate as a credible doctrinal authority; and the alignment between official discourse and institutional behavior. Each of these conditions is subject to erosion from the demographic, technological, and geopolitical pressures identified in the structural vulnerability analysis. The implication for comparative politics is that secular governance in Muslim-majority contexts is not a binary outcome – present or absent – but a continuously negotiated achievement that depends on the active maintenance of specific institutional conditions.

Conclusion

This study has examined the politics of multiple religious identity in Kazakhstan, demonstrating the complex and mutually conditioning interactions among syncretism, secularism, and state governance in a Muslim-majority post-Soviet polity. Four analytically significant findings emerge from the foregoing analysis.

First, in response to sub-problem (1), process tracing of Kazakhstan's religious history demonstrates that the contemporary multiple-religious-identity configuration – Tengrist, Sufi-Islamic, Soviet-secular – is a structurally stable outcome of layered institutional processes rather than a transitional state. These findings challenge governance models premised on the eventual convergence toward either orthodox Islam or thoroughgoing secularism, supporting instead a sedimentation thesis that acknowledges the enduring political salience of syncretic heritage.

Second, in response to sub-problem (2), the discourse analysis reveals that the state's management of religious plurality operates primarily through the discursive construction of a “traditional”/“foreign” Islam boundary, implemented through a systematic semantic decoupling of security threats from Islamic identity in official registers. The 89:19 ratio of security-adjacent to Muslim-referential lexical occurrences in presidential addresses constitutes measurable evidence of this strategy. However, triangulation against independent sources documents a legitimacy gap between official discourse and institutional practice that constitutes a structural vulnerability of the managed pluralism model.

Third, in response to sub-problem (3), the analysis of societal cleavages demonstrates that the governance challenges posed by multiple religious identities intersect with urban–rural, generational, class, and doctrinal divisions, requiring differentiated policy responses. The claim that the increase in Muslim self-identification between 2007 and 2012 is attributable primarily to youth requires a cohort-controlled analysis; the available aggregate data support a broad multi-cohort trend, with youth potentially more pronounced, but do not permit exclusive attribution.

Fourth, in response to sub-problem (4), the structural vulnerability analysis identifies digital transformation, generational demographic shifts, and transnational religious flows as the principal challenges to the long-term sustainability of the current governance model, calling for adaptive recalibration of institutional strategies developed in a pre-digital, Soviet-socialization-anchored context.

Theoretically, the study contributes to scholarship on religion and state by illuminating how multiple religious identities can coexist and interact within a single political system in ways that resist resolution into a unitary religious-secular binary. Future research should prioritize longitudinal cohort-level analyses of generational change in religious identity, comparative investigations across Central Asian states, and systematic analyses of digital platforms as vectors of religious identity formation. Gender dimensions of religious identity politics – contested practices of religious dress, women's religious education, gendered ritual roles – merit particular analytical attention as an underexplored dimension of the governance challenges documented here.

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