

The Issue of Preventing Religious Extremism in Kazakhstan

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a comprehensive theoretical and practical analysis of the prevention of religious extremism in the Republic of Kazakhstan. The study aims to provide a systematic review of state policies and domestic scholarly efforts intended to strengthen preventive measures against religious extremism. Methodologically, the research draws on the principle of systemic inquiry and employs textual analysis alongside comparative analysis. The findings indicate that Kazakhstan has approached the threat of religious extremism at the strategic level and has implemented a set of integrated measures—legal, socio-cultural, and ideological—designed to reduce vulnerability and mitigate risks. The study also demonstrates that the phenomenon of religious extremism and the mechanisms of its prevention have been actively examined within Kazakhstani philosophy, religious studies, and the social sciences. However, persistent divergences in academic perspectives and enduring gaps between theoretical approaches suggest the absence of a fully consolidated analytical framework. Against this background, the article substantiates the need to distinguish clearly between strategic (long-term, structural) and tactical (operational, applied) levels of prevention, arguing that such differentiation is essential for improving both conceptual clarity and policy effectiveness. The results may contribute to further theoretical research on religious extremism and can be used in the teaching of philosophy, religious studies, sociology, and psychology. The main scholarly contribution of the study lies in its systematic mapping of existing approaches to the prevention of religious extremism in Kazakhstan and in its conceptual proposal to differentiate prevention strategies from tactical interventions.

Keywords: religious extremism; Kazakhstan; prevention of extremism; extremism prevention; strategy; tactics; tolerance.

INTRODUCTION

Extremism and terrorism have become major global security challenges in the contemporary world, and a substantial body of scholarship has examined these phenomena from multiple perspectives (Laqueur, 1979; Alexander & Maxwell, 1979; Post, 1984; Marsella, 2004; Žižek, 2010). Researchers have offered extensive analyses

of the psychological and socio-cultural roots of extremist ideologies and violent practices (Sosnin & Nestik, 2008; Baudrillard, 2016). In Kazakhstan, the risks associated with religious extremism and terrorism emerged as a pressing practical issue following independence. Sovereignty not only restored the public role of religion but also created an institutional and legal space for the protection of freedom of belief.

Historically, from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries onward, the principal ethnic groups in Kazakhstan have been Kazakhs and Russians. During the Soviet period, levels of religious observance and institutional religiosity were markedly suppressed. However, in the years of independence, religious consciousness expanded rapidly and the activities of religious organizations intensified, accompanied by a sharp increase in the number of believers. Islam (predominantly Sunni, Hanafi tradition) and Orthodox Christianity have remained the most widely practiced faiths in the country. Across Kazakhstan, mosques and churches were reopened and newly built, and a network of religious educational institutions began to develop. Yet, at the local level—particularly within Islamic institutions—there was a pronounced shortage of qualified clergy and trained theologians. In the early years, the government was therefore compelled to invite imams and instructors for Islamic educational establishments from abroad.

At the same time, alongside forms of religiosity consistent with Kazakhstan's traditional Islamic heritage, individuals associated with radical Islamist interpretations and, in some cases, extremist networks began to enter the country. Bringing with them an exclusivist ideological repertoire, they sought to recruit ordinary believers—especially young people—into radical worldviews. Such narratives were disseminated through sermons delivered from mosque pulpits, instructional activities in some religious schools, and broader media channels. Recognizing the potential threat posed by these developments, the state moved to introduce protective measures aimed at safeguarding society from the activities of Islamist radicals and extremist actors.

A key step in this direction was the adoption of the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan “On Religious Activity and Religious Associations” in 2011, which established a legal framework regulating the operation of religious communities within the context of a secular state (Republic of Kazakhstan, 2011). In addition, an official list of organizations recognized by court decisions as extremist and therefore prohibited across the country was made public, and restrictions were introduced on the circulation of religious materials deemed extremist in content. These measures were intended not only to strengthen the capacity of specialized state agencies but also to provide ordinary citizens with clearer guidance on which organizations and materials carried extremist characteristics.

Kazakhstan's First President, N. A. Nazarbayev, consistently emphasized the importance of preventing religious radicalism and extremism. In his 2012 Address, he argued that Kazakhstan must continue to refine its legislation in order to neutralize manifestations of religious radicalism and extremism and to strengthen counter-terrorism laws. He stressed that the state should firmly suppress any form of extremism and radicalism, develop effective mechanisms for resolving social and interethnic tensions that can generate conflict, and block the activities of dubious pseudo-religious movements—while, above all, intensifying preventive efforts among youth (Nazarbayev, 2012). In the same Address, he also cautioned that counter-extremism policies should not degenerate into politicized campaigns or turn into a struggle against religion itself. He underscored the need for competent and cautious action in matters of faith, insisting that the state must not interfere in the internal affairs of religious associations and must uphold freedom of conscience and Kazakhstan's longstanding traditions of religious tolerance and social restraint (Nazarbayev, 2012). This position effectively framed an institutional expectation for law-enforcement and security services to act prudently and to avoid infringing upon believers' constitutional rights.

In 2013, Kazakhstan adopted the “State Programme on Countering Religious Extremism and Terrorism in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2013–2017” (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2013). More broadly, countering religious extremism (as well as other forms of extremism) cannot be reduced to the mandate of security agencies alone; it is a shared societal responsibility that also implicates scholars, educators, and civil actors. Within this broader division of labour, researchers in the social sciences and humanities are tasked with examining religious extremism as a multidimensional phenomenon and with proposing evidence-based approaches for its prevention and mitigation. Accordingly, the study of religious extremism—particularly in its Islamist manifestations—and the development of effective preventive strategies remain highly relevant in Kazakhstan's contemporary context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept and definition of extremism have been approached from multiple angles in the scholarly literature, reflecting both terminological ambiguity and methodological diversity. Among Kazakhstani researchers who have examined the conceptual foundations of extremism and proposed definitional frameworks are T. V. Klimova, D. B. Bashanova, G. Niyatbekov, and others. From the perspective of classification and typology, the work of B. A. Abibulayev deserves particular attention for its systematic attempt to differentiate forms of extremism. In studies specifically focused on defining **religious extremism**, the contributions of A. R. Almukhametov, A. Z. Niyakhov,

and A. A. Kaliyeva are widely cited, while the nature of religious extremism and its modalities of manifestation have been explored in depth by R. K. Turyszhanova and M. K. Tashbulatova.

A separate body of scholarship addresses the mechanisms and technologies through which religious consciousness may become radicalized. Relevant contributions include, among others, works by Q. M. Bishmanov and N. A. Orynbekov (Bishmanov & Orynbekov, 2022), K. K. Begalinova, A. D. Kurmanaliyeva, E. E. Burova (Burova, 2014), N. S. Kaldybekov, A. M. Sergaliyev, N. A. Mukanova, Sh. M. Zhandosova, A. D. Shagirbayev, and other scholars. The broader theoretical principles of countering extremism have been discussed in the works of S. Yu. Kolchigin and Sh. S. Rysbekova (Kolchigin, 2004). Studies directly addressing the prevention of religious extremism and counter-extremism policies in Kazakhstan include research by V. D. Kurganskaya, M. Nurgaliyeva, R. S. Irzhanov, N. Z. Mailybaeva, R. S. Mukhitdinov, E. B. Amire, N. A. Orynbekov, and Q. Shamshadin, among others. In particular, Kurganskaya (2011) analyzes the factors contributing to the intensification of extremism, while Nurgaliyeva (2011) examines the risks of religious extremism in Kazakhstan and evaluates the country's preparedness to respond.

A notable recent contribution is N. A. Orynbekov's monograph *Religious Extremism and Religious Education: The Kazakhstani Experience* (2025). In the second chapter, the author analyzes the preventive potential of religious education and emphasizes that raising young people's religious literacy should be complemented by strengthening their legal literacy—a dual focus presented as a critical component of resilience against radicalization (Orynbekov, 2025, p. 207). Overall, Kazakh-language scholarship on religious extremism and its prevention has expanded in recent years; nevertheless, the existing volume of research remains insufficient relative to the scale and complexity of the problem, thereby reinforcing its academic and practical relevance.

In addition, a number of Kazakhstani scholars argue that the resources for preventing religious extremism can be sought partly within religion itself. For example, G. G. Solovyeva (2011) and A. G. Kosichenko (2011) highlight the counter-extremism potential of traditional religions. According to Kosichenko (2011), religious traditions may contribute to prevention both directly and indirectly: direct influence is realized through shaping believers' moral consciousness and orienting conduct toward ethical ideals, whereas indirect influence is manifested through reminding state authorities of their responsibility to secure social justice and public welfare (Kosichenko, 2011). By contrast, V. Yu. Dunaev argues that counter-extremism strategies should place less emphasis on opposing "traditional" religious values to those of radical movements, and instead prioritize the promotion of secular values of free inquiry and the cultivation of critical thinking (Dunaev, 2014). In his view, curricula in religious studies at both secondary and higher education levels should be revised accordingly to strengthen analytical competencies and reduce susceptibility to extremist narratives.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological framework of this study is grounded in the principle of systemic analysis and employs qualitative content analysis and comparative analysis as its primary research methods. From a systemic perspective, the diverse approaches and practices related to the prevention of religious extremism in Kazakhstan are examined as interconnected elements within a broader analytical framework, allowing for an integrated assessment of policies, discourses, and institutional responses.

Content analysis is used to examine the substance of key official documents, legal acts, policy programmes, and scholarly publications relevant to religious extremism and its prevention. This method makes it possible to identify dominant narratives, conceptual patterns, and normative assumptions shaping both state policy and academic debate.

Comparative analysis is applied to juxtapose different interpretations, strategies, and policy recommendations concerning the prevention of extremism. Through this approach, points of convergence and divergence among theoretical perspectives and practical proposals are systematically identified, enabling a more nuanced evaluation of their explanatory power and practical relevance.

RESULTS

A systematic analysis of the research findings allows for the formulation of the following conclusions.

1. **The Comprehensive and Evolutionary Character of State Policy.**

The Republic of Kazakhstan has developed a multifaceted and evolving policy framework aimed at addressing the threat of religious extremism in a comprehensive manner. This framework integrates legal and regulatory instruments with broader social, educational, and informational measures. From the adoption of the Law "On Religious Activity and Religious Associations" in 2011 to the implementation of the State Programme for 2013–2017, Kazakhstan's normative and policy documents have gone beyond

purely reactive measures, such as banning extremist organizations. Instead, they have increasingly emphasized preventive approaches, including educational initiatives, youth engagement, and the enhancement of religious literacy. This policy model has been developed on an evidence-based foundation, drawing on systematic assessments of social risks and security challenges. Its effective implementation, however, requires sustained coordination between law-enforcement bodies and the education sector, as well as institutional coherence across different levels of governance.

2. **The Dynamism and Pluralism of the Scientific Discourse.**

Kazakhstani academic scholarship approaches religious extremism from legal, philosophical, theological, sociological, and psychological perspectives, generating a diverse range of methodological approaches and conceptual interpretations. This plurality reflects the complexity of the phenomenon but also reveals significant divergences in proposed solutions. For example, scholars such as Solovyeva and Kosichenko emphasize the strengthening of traditional religious institutions as a central strategy for countering extremism. In contrast, Dunaev argues that engaging in a direct “values confrontation” between traditional religion and radical movements is of limited effectiveness; instead, he advocates prioritizing the development of secular critical thinking and legal literacy within society. While each position is grounded in coherent theoretical reasoning, the academic community has yet to reach a consolidated view on which approach should be prioritized. Although such diversity enriches analytical understanding, it simultaneously complicates the coordination of practical measures. This situation underscores the need for greater conceptual alignment and for comparative evaluations of the effectiveness of existing prevention strategies.

3. **The Necessity of Distinguishing between Strategic and Tactical Levels.**

The analysis of accumulated experience and empirical materials demonstrates the importance of conceptualizing counter-extremism measures across two interrelated but distinct levels: strategic and tactical.

- *The Strategic Level* encompasses long-term objectives and nationwide frameworks aimed at addressing the structural and root causes of extremism. This includes promoting social justice, filling ideological vacuums with civic and patriotic values, developing a robust system of religious education, fostering a culture of critical thinking, strengthening youth policy, and enhancing international cooperation. At this level, the principal actors are the state and society as a whole.

- *The Tactical Level* involves concrete and immediate measures, such as imposing legal bans on extremist organizations and materials, monitoring and regulating online spaces, conducting targeted preventive work with at-risk youth, and improving the professional qualifications of religious leaders. Here, the primary actors include specialized state agencies, educational institutions, and civil society organizations.

A clear differentiation between these two levels enables a more coherent alignment of long-term strategies with short-term operational responses and facilitates the delineation of institutional responsibilities. Without tangible progress at the strategic level, tactical measures risk remaining fragmented and temporary; conversely, strategic goals cannot be realized in practice without effective tactical instruments.

4. **External Influence and the Role of the International Context.**

The period of religious revival following independence, combined with a shortage of qualified domestic religious specialists, created conditions conducive to the penetration of external ideological influences, including radical currents. This experience demonstrates that religious extremism is not solely a domestic phenomenon but one with a pronounced transnational dimension. Consequently, effective prevention requires not only the strengthening of national religious education systems but also improved mechanisms of international cooperation and information exchange.

In summary, Kazakhstan has developed a dynamic and comprehensive model for preventing religious extremism, encompassing legal mechanisms as well as broader socio-cultural strategies. At the same time, persistent pluralism within the academic discourse and the insufficiently articulated linkage between long-term strategic objectives and short-term tactical measures indicate the need for further refinement of existing approaches. A key direction for future research lies in identifying practical mechanisms to ensure the effective interaction between strategic and tactical levels of prevention, thereby enhancing both theoretical coherence and policy effectiveness.

SCIENTIFIC ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Scholars have examined the prevention of religious extremism and counter-extremism measures in considerable depth and have proposed a wide range of policy and practice-oriented recommendations. Given the

breadth of these proposals, it is not feasible to cover them exhaustively within the scope of a single article. Nevertheless, representatives of different disciplines converge on several important analytical insights.

Legal scholars tend to emphasize the need to strengthen the legislative foundations of prevention and to ensure clear regulatory mechanisms for implementation. Sociologists focus primarily on addressing the social drivers of extremism, including inequality, exclusion, and structural grievances. Psychologists, in turn, highlight the importance of accounting for individual-level vulnerabilities and the personal characteristics of those most susceptible to radicalization. Specialists in social philosophy, political science, and religious studies direct attention to the erosion of shared value foundations and to the emergence of worldview vacuums that can be filled by rigid and absolutist ideologies.

In this respect, a sociological study conducted in Almaty in 2005 classified the probable drivers of extremism into four broad categories (“Extremism in Central Asia: Assessing Trends (the Case of Kazakhstan),” 2005):

1. **Socio-Economic Factors:** perceived social injustice, the prevalence of corruption, a low standard of living among significant segments of the population, widening inequality between rich and poor, and insecurity about the future.
2. **Spiritual-Ideational Factors:** moral decline, a turn to religion not out of a grounded existential need but due to contingent circumstances (often described as “nominal” or “performative” religiosity), and the absence of a unifying societal ideology.
3. **Political-Legal Factors:** the instrumentalization of religion for political purposes, the incomplete development of legal mechanisms for managing interreligious tensions, and the lack of a stable specialized state body to monitor religious associations on an ongoing basis.
4. **External Factors:** covert influence by foreign states and the active presence of foreign religious missionaries.

Public perceptions, however, often prioritize security-driven responses. Survey findings reported by Orynbekov (2025, p. 169) indicate that respondents tend to place coercive measures first in countering extremism, followed by improving the quality of education, and then by enhancing socio-economic conditions. This hierarchy of preferences suggests that, in the public imagination, extremism is frequently framed primarily as a security threat, whereas its socio-structural and ideological determinants are treated as secondary.

The Dilemma of Coercive Measures

A number of scholars approach coercive strategies critically. Kolchigin (2004), for example, argues that force-based suppression may be capable of temporarily constraining extremist groups, yet it is unlikely to yield a durable resolution. In his view, external force can be countered by another external force in the short term, but the defeated side may later recover and reconstitute its capacity (Kolchigin, 2004). This argument is broadly persuasive, particularly when extremism remains at the level of ideological mobilization rather than organized violence. At the same time, when extremist actors shift toward overt aggression, the state may be compelled to rely on coercive instruments. In such circumstances, however, the proportionality of force becomes decisive: state action must correspond to the level of threat and remain within legally and normatively justified limits.

Leveraging The Potential of Traditional Religions

Kazakhstani scholarship on prevention is comparable in scope and sophistication to research produced in neighboring and wider international contexts. Burova (2014), for instance, provides a comprehensive set of recommendations for both state institutions and society. She argues that building “cultural immunity” against extremism requires the constructive engagement of traditional religions, restrictions on harmful online influences, and the refinement of legal mechanisms (Burova, 2014). Relatedly, Solovyeva (2011) and Kosichenko (2011) maintain that religious traditions themselves may serve as resources for prevention. According to Kosichenko (2011), traditional religions can contribute both directly and indirectly: directly by orienting believers’ conscience and behavior toward ethical norms, and indirectly by reminding the state of its responsibility to strengthen social justice and improve public welfare (Kosichenko, 2011). This position implicitly links prevention to broader governance quality and social policy legitimacy.

Developing Critical Thinking

Dunaev (2012) argues that countering religious extremism should prioritize the consolidation of values associated with free inquiry and the cultivation of critical and creative thinking. This perspective is particularly relevant for youth-focused prevention: without strong analytical competencies, including the ability to evaluate sources, compare competing claims, and formulate independent judgments, resistance to extremist narratives remains weak. Embedding such competencies requires not only targeted educational interventions but also broader reforms in curricula and teaching practices—an agenda that lies beyond the immediate scope of this article but remains integral to long-term prevention.

The Culture of Tolerance and its Limits

Many researchers consider the promotion of tolerance to be a key element of prevention, especially in the management of interreligious relations. In Kazakhstan, interfaith respect and social harmony are widely articulated as public values. Yet the concept of “tolerance” itself is contested. Tsepkova (2008) distinguishes tolerance as respectful openness toward alternative views and as an ethical refusal to condemn others in advance. At the same time, tolerance cannot be unlimited: extending tolerance to ideologies and practices that pose a direct threat to public safety and social cohesion risks undermining the very foundations of the polity. In this normative register, Berdyaev (1994) suggests that a person deeply committed to the truth claims of their faith may not be able to remain tolerant of false beliefs that negate truth. Valitova (2001) argues that tolerance does not entail agreement, but rather recognition of pluralism—that is, the legitimacy of difference. By contrast, Batishchev (1997) critiques excessive pluralistic tolerance as a superficial politeness that merely “freezes” disagreement rather than resolving it. Hamidov (2008) further observes that, in certain Western contexts, the concept of tolerance has expanded to the point of normalizing practices that many societies would regard as socially harmful. For Kazakhstan, such an unbounded interpretation is difficult to reconcile with national value frameworks and with the imperative of maintaining social cohesion. Therefore, tolerance-based discourse in prevention strategies should be normatively bounded and aligned with societal integrity, ensuring that openness does not translate into permissiveness toward extremist ideologies.

Overall, the analysis suggests that effective prevention requires a balanced architecture that combines security instruments with long-term socio-educational and value-based interventions. In practical terms, this implies: (i) maintaining proportionate coercive measures where necessary; (ii) investing in education and legal literacy; (iii) developing critical thinking as a societal competence; and (iv) operationalizing tolerance in a way that supports pluralism while clearly excluding extremist doctrines that threaten public order and constitutional norms.

Strategic and Tactical Measures

Building on the foregoing analysis, the prevention of religious extremism and efforts to counter it should be conceptualized at two interrelated levels: strategic and tactical. At the **strategic level**, core directions are articulated through state programmes and policy frameworks, which define long-term goals and overarching priorities (for example, the State Programme for 2013–2017 outlined the principal strategic objectives in this domain). At the **tactical level**, these strategic objectives must be translated into concrete mechanisms and practices implemented across different sectors of society.

Accordingly, the state should design tailored sets of preventive measures for each sector—law-enforcement agencies, security services, the education system, the scientific community, religious institutions, non-governmental organizations, and other civil actors—taking into account their specific mandates, resources, and capacities. Examples include the following:

- **Law-enforcement agencies (Internal Affairs bodies)** are responsible for implementing preventive activities and conducting special operations against extremist activities within the scope of their legal authority.
- **The National Security Committee** plays a central role in identifying and neutralizing covert extremist activities that pose a direct threat to national security.
- **The education sector** is tasked with providing high-quality education and civic upbringing, thereby fostering resilience to radicalization and cultivating critical and ethical awareness among young people.
- **The scientific and expert community** is responsible for the continuous study of the causes, dynamics, and patterns of extremism and for developing evidence-based recommendations to inform public policy.
- **Traditional religious associations** contribute through preaching and educational activities that reinforce values of peace, moderation, and social responsibility.
- **Non-governmental organizations and other civil society institutions** support prevention through informational, educational, and community-based initiatives aimed at raising awareness and strengthening social cohesion.

In sum, the effective prevention of religious extremism depends on the coordinated implementation of programmes and methodological measures across all relevant sectors. Only when these efforts are integrated into a coherent, system-wide framework—linking long-term strategic vision with targeted tactical interventions—can preventive policies achieve sustained effectiveness and social legitimacy.

CONCLUSION

This study provides a comprehensive scholarly analysis of the Republic of Kazakhstan’s experience in preventing religious extremism and implementing counter-extremism measures. During the post-independence

period, the rapid revitalization of religious consciousness, combined with a shortage of professionally trained theologians, created conditions conducive to the inflow of radical ideological currents from abroad. These dynamics required the state to develop responses that are not merely reactive, but preventive, systematic, and strategically oriented.

The findings allow several key conclusions to be drawn.

First, the comprehensiveness and evolutionary character of state policy.

Kazakhstan has developed a multidimensional approach to countering religious extremism that extends beyond narrowly coercive instruments and incorporates long-term social-educational, informational, and ideological components. From the 2011 Law “On Religious Activity and Religious Associations” to the State Programme for 2013–2017, the country’s regulatory and policy framework has combined restrictive measures aimed at limiting extremist organizations with preventive mechanisms that prioritize the enhancement of young people’s religious and legal literacy and the cultivation of a culture of critical thinking. This orientation indicates an effort to address not only the manifestations of extremism, but also its underlying drivers.

Second, the pluralism of the academic discourse and the need to distinguish strategic and tactical levels.

Kazakhstani scholarship examines religious extremism through legal, social, philosophical, political, and theological lenses, offering a range of methodological approaches. However, the analysis demonstrates that practical effectiveness depends on a clear differentiation between **strategic** measures (long-term interventions addressing structural and value-based determinants) and **tactical** measures (operational responses to immediate and concrete threats). While the strategic level implies shared responsibility between the state and society, the tactical level falls primarily within the mandate of specialized agencies and sector-specific institutions. Sustainable outcomes require coherent interaction between these levels rather than isolated or fragmented interventions.

Third, the interdependence of internal and external determinants.

The diffusion of religious extremism cannot be reduced to a single causal factor. It emerges from the complex interaction of internal drivers—such as socio-economic inequality, ideological vacuums, and deficiencies in youth socialization—together with external pressures, including transnational radical networks, digital propaganda, and forms of ideological expansion from abroad. Consequently, prevention strategies must be comprehensive, multi-level, and genuinely cross-sectoral, rather than narrowly targeted or episodic.

Fourth, the role distribution among key actors and the boundaries of normative principles.

The study does not deny the necessity of coercive measures in countering extremism; nevertheless, it underscores that such instruments should be applied primarily in a tactical and protective capacity. Over the long term, sustainable stability depends on the educational and socializing potential of traditional religious institutions, the role of the education system, and the active participation of civil society and expert communities in preventive and informational work. At the same time, the promotion of tolerance and pluralism must be normatively bounded: their limits should be clearly articulated when confronted with extremist ideologies that threaten social cohesion and national security.

In conclusion, Kazakhstan has developed an integrated prevention framework that extends from legal regulation to socio-cultural and worldview-oriented strategies. Future effectiveness will depend on strengthening the linkage between long-term strategic objectives and short-term tactical responses, as well as on deepening institutional cooperation among state agencies, religious institutions, the education system, and the scholarly and expert community. In this context, fostering individual critical thinking, reinforcing national-cultural identity, and adapting international experience to local conditions will remain decisive and enduring factors in the prevention of religious extremism.

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