

REPATRIATION OF KAZAKH WOMEN AND CHILDREN FROM CONFLICT ZONES IN SYRIA AND IRAQ

ABSTRACT: The issues of combatting terrorism and extremism are considered to be the most acute problems in the national security of many countries. Terrorism has never been seen in Kazakhstan as a real threat, but more as a potential danger. However, after the terrorist attacks that took place on the territory of Kazakhstan, the threat of terrorism has become a reality. Moreover, a number of citizens of Kazakhstan left the country in order to join the “holy war” mainly in Syria and Iraq, and contribute to the building of the “Islamic Caliphate.” In order to evacuate the Kazakh citizens left in dangerous terrorist zones, the National Security of the Republic of Kazakhstan conducted a large-scale humanitarian operation “Zhusan”¹ returning 607 citizens (413 of them are children) from ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). In this article, various factors and motives of women who were under the influence of terrorist ideology and who emigrated to ISIS in order to become “true” Muslims are revealed based on the research works of Kazakh and foreign scholars and researchers as well as interviews of the women themselves and experts who worked with them.

KEYWORDS: Kazakhstan, terrorism, female Islamic identity, repatriation from ISIS, “Zhusan” operation, deradicalization, rehabilitation, reintegration

After gaining independence the role of Islam, which was restricted during the Soviet period, has increased nationwide and become an integral part of the society of secular Kazakhstan experiencing a period of revival. Although the majority of the population of Kazakhstan consider themselves Muslims, their religious self-identification is due to ethnicity. So if the person is ethnic Kazakh, then by default, he is considered to be a Muslim. According to the recent census, 69.3% of citizens of Kazakhstan declared their confession to Islam. However, as poll results show, only 10% of them strictly observe all rituals required by the religion (Zhanuzakov). At the same time, along with the growth of religious consciousness in society, there is a growing trend of religious extremism, which is one of the most serious threats to the state’s internal security (Nuradinov and Zhumageldinov, p. 46).

Moreover, Islamic discourse in Kazakh society has become heterogeneous, since along with the majority of the country’s Muslims following Hanafi school, there have emerged noticeable supporters of so-called “pure Islam” followed by “new Muslims” under the influence of foreign imams. These supporters advocate for a strict differentiation between Islam and ethnic culture, claiming the traditional customs of Kazakh Muslims such as a pilgrimage to holy places, veneration of *aulie* (‘saints’), and Sufi practices as a manifestation of shirk (polytheism; Shapovalova and Bekmaganbetova, p. 291).

¹ *Zhusan* means ‘sagebrush’ in the Kazakh language and symbolizes the smell of the Kazakh steppes, the smell of the motherland.

Terrorism has never been seen in Kazakhstan as a real threat, but more as a potential danger, focusing more on preventing other threats such as interethnic conflicts, drug trafficking, economic threats, and corruption. Moreover, terrorism was largely viewed as an external threat that could potentially enter the country from outside. Therefore, the measures such as enhancing the state border protection system and enforcing strict migration laws were implemented to prevent any external threat. However, there has been a rise in the number of individuals in Kazakhstan being held accountable for crimes related to extremism and terrorism. Official data shows that the National Security Committee prevented 7 attacks during 2008–2009. Consequently, the situation has changed, and terrorism which was once viewed as a remote and virtual issue poses a direct threat to national security (Karin).

Furthermore, the problem of terrorism in Kazakhstan was discussed only in the context of the general situation in Central Asia. There was also an opinion that the territory of Kazakhstan was used as a transit site for “foreign terrorists.” So, for example, from 2000–2004, law enforcement agencies of Kazakhstan detained and extradited 8 citizens of Uzbekistan and in 2006, 13 people convicted of involvement in terrorism were detained and extradited to Russia, Uzbekistan, Turkey, and China (Karin). Thus, a well-known political scientist Y. Karin determines the following stages of the development of terrorism in the country: “foreign terrorists” (late 1990s – early 2000s), “recruited terrorists” (early and mid–2000s), “local or own terrorists” (between 2005 and 2011) (Qasqabayeva, p. 192).

Also, Kazakh citizens began to leave for Syria and Iraq in 2011–2012. Thus, in 2015 there were about 400 people, including 150 women and 50 children who departed to ISIS. According to the National Security Committee, between 2013 and 2017, 608 people were prevented from following the same path (Ryzhechkin, p. 141). A video about a Kazakh jihadist group that moved to Syria (posted on YouTube in 2013) drew public attention to this situation. Later, relatives began to spread reports about the death of their children who left the country for jihad. After that, the cases of parents asking for help to return their children, grandchildren, and widows of sons became more frequent (Veber). Thus, at the beginning of 2019, on the initiative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, a special operation “Zhusan” on the repatriation of Kazakh citizens from ISIS was implemented (Qasqabayeva, p. 190). As a result of the special operation, 607 (413 of them were children) citizens were returned to Kazakhstan from Syria. The same operation called “Rusafa” was launched to return Kazakh children from Iraq. As a result, 14 Kazakh children were returned to the country. However, their mothers remained in Iraqi prisons (Nuradinov and Zhumageldinov, p. 59).

The number of women among supporters of radical Islamists has been significantly increasing. According to the National Security Committee, today there are 662 citizens of Kazakhstan, including 14 women serving a sentence for crimes related to religious extremism and terrorism (Dubovaya).

In post-Soviet Kazakhstan, in the context of ethnic and religious revival, several types of female Muslim identities have been formed. Y. Shapoval and M. Bekmaganbetova define several categories of Muslim women in Kazakhstan. One of the common types of female religiosity is associated with the processes of national and spiritual revival and reflects the perception of Islam as an important part of ethnic culture, traditions, and rituals. Therefore, this type of female Muslim identity can be conditionally designated as a “traditional” female Muslim. This type of Muslim female identity is not accompanied by an external

representation of religiosity, for instance, wearing a hijab. The clothes of these women are either completely secular or include separate national and cultural elements. The other female Muslim identity is represented by wearing hijab and pertained to the “new Muslim” identity (Shapoval and Bekmaganbetova, pp. 293–294).

In regard to the motifs of leaving the home country and emigrating to dangerous conflict zones, one of the reasons can be that ISIS attracts women who feel marginalized or oppressed in their societies by offering them a sense of importance, purpose, and impetus in their lives. Also, ISIS presents an idealized image of Islamic society where they can get an education and social interaction with other Muslims (Shapoval and Bekmaganbetova, p. 290).

O. Roy indicates that ISIS appeals to young females seeking a sense of identity and belonging to a globalized world (Roy, pp. 32–33).

Most women considered their departure to the territory seized by the Islamic State as a *hijra*, by analogy with the *hijra* (resettlement) of the Prophet Muhammad with the Muslim community from pagan Mecca to Medina, where the Muslim community began to live according to Sharia within the framework of the Islamic State organized by Muhammad. Muslim foreigners who arrived at ISIS from other countries were called *muhajir*, just like the Muslims who migrated with the Prophet were called (Shapoval and Bekmaganbetova, p. 291). Terrorists and extremists of ISIS recruitment claimed that all adherents of their ideology were required to move from any secular state where Muslims were allegedly oppressed to the country of ISIS where they could candidly follow all Islamic principles according to Sharia law (Department of Legal Statistics and Special Accounts of Almaty city, 2021). According to the interviews of several Kazakh women who were repatriated to Kazakhstan and are currently being sentenced to prison for spreading propaganda of destructive ideology, they were attracted by the religious aspect of ISIS ideology since they believed that the majority of people living in secular Kazakhstan were unbelievers and the authorities were their adversaries. They were ready to leave their families (believing that they were non-believers) and live in any conditions with only a chance to be surrounded by sincere believers who would accept and support them.²

Also, ISIS propaganda romanticizes the lives of women in the self-proclaimed caliphate. As for the role of these women, A. Spencer explains that despite the duties of the women in ISIS as being a wife to the soldier, giving birth to the next generation of jihadists, and contributing to the recruitment of other women through online platforms, they have influential positions as activities from moral and logistical support to espionage and tactical terror operations. Also, ISIS actively recruits women for ideological and political purposes. They try to show the growing population and get media attention (Spencer, p. 76).

Religious scholars of Kazakhstan Y. Shapoval and M. Bekmaganbetova conducted a sociological survey where they analyzed the socioeconomic and psychological aspects of repatriated women from ISIS. According to the authors, there is a significant simplification in the explanation of women who have emigrated to ISIS as socially marginalized, or women with low income and with a low level of education. According to the survey,

² See “Flowers in Chains,” a YouTube documentary filmed by the National Security Affairs Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2019).

most women have a good level of secular education and belonged to people of average or close to average income. Based on the analysis of interviews given by these women, the main factors behind their emigration were an identity crisis due to age and personal life situation, a religious quest to find a life guide, social support, a sense of belonging to a group, a romantic factor, a low level of knowledge about Islam and the religious traditions and practices, insufficient attention to the sphere of religious education of women in the SAMK³ system, and finally, ISIS propaganda that affected the emotional sphere of women (Shapoval and Bekmaganbetova, pp. 299–303).

Thus, it can be summarized that a low level of knowledge about Islam with underdeveloped infrastructure for women's religious education, the issues of confrontation with a secular society, where wearing the hijab was a reason for not accepting women, and was also accompanied by a difficulty finding a job, problems in the family (illness, accident, criminal nature of the activities of one of the parents), identity crisis experienced by all young women due to age. Furthermore, young women were involved in the life of the *jamaat*⁴ which promoted "pure Islam" where everyone calls each other "sisters" strengthening emotional ties and evoking a feeling of support. Also, the members of this religious community found suitable jobs for them, and if the young woman was not married, they found a husband from a religious community with whom they emigrated to ISIS.

According to psychologist S. Mukanova, who immediately worked with the returnees, most women were invited by their husbands since it is obligatory to follow one's husband in Islam. Some women were deluded by their husbands thinking that they were going to study or have a vacation in Turkey. They realized that they were going to Syria on the way, but they had to give up because there was no way back. Also, they believed that by dying in a war they would go to heaven (Veber).

Most of the women who emigrated to ISIS were young women, and a significant number emigrated from Western and Central Kazakhstan, as well as from the two major cities of Astana and Almaty. A significant number of women were internal migrants. Their radicalization took place in the urban environment. The level of secular education of women was quite high, but the level of religious knowledge was superficial.

Initially, members of terrorist organizations mainly conducted their propaganda from mosques and local religious communities. However, lately, social networks also played a certain role by actively promoting prohibited activities on the Internet. Thus, 84% of those who joined ISIS could make it through the Internet, 47% were interested in videos and texts posted online, 41% of netizens swore allegiance to ISIS online, and 19% used online instructions for preparing a terrorist attack as making explosive devices. Most often, propaganda and recruitment of ISIS were carried out through popular social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, Moi Mir, etc. (Valitova, p. 56). So the terrorists use specific recruiting methods to strive to win over a person as much as possible, becoming a mentor and friend for him or her (Valitova, p. 58).

During the operation, citizens who returned to Kazakhstan were provided with psychological, social, theological, and material assistance and were placed in a special rehabilitation center. Then, the women returned to their families and children were able

³ Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan (established in 1990).

⁴ Jamaat – association of a group of Muslims for the purpose of studying Islam together, performing religious rites, mutual assistance, regular communication with each other, etc.

to go to school. For children whose documents were missing or even if they were born outside the territory of Kazakhstan, they were given official birth certificates (Qasqabayeva, p. 192). On the one hand, children were victims of terrorism, and on the other, the facts of their use for terrorist purposes by ISIS were known, as well as the functioning of the schools for children so-called “Lions of the Caliphate” in Syria. It was impossible to bring underage participants in terrorist activities to criminal responsibility, but still, it was dangerous to transfer them into society. Therefore, proper psychological work was extremely important (Arefev, p. 44).

The problem of preventing radicalization was relatively new for Kazakhstan and began to be actively considered after the first wave of terrorist attacks in 2011. Thus, in 2012 one of the first centers for the ideological deradicalization of believers consultative and rehabilitation center “Ansar” was opened in Aktobe. As a result, for the period 2012–2016, 284 people were deradicalized (Sabdin, p. 60).

In general, Kazakhstan is implementing a comprehensive multilateral approach to rehabilitation, striving to cover all aspects of the life of repatriates. Thus, Kazakhstan’s approach is not limited to socio-psychological rehabilitation or a model of theological dialogue but is a more holistic approach. Subsequently, similar rehabilitation centers for ideological deradicalization were opened in many regions of the republic such as “Akniyet” in Astana, “Shanyrak” in Almaty, “Shans” in Karagandy, etc. (Sabdin, p. 61). From the side of the state, these centers are fully provided with consultative, methodological, and informational support, and psychological rehabilitation for victims of various destructive trends. For example, materials such as a collection of counterarguments by authoritative international and domestic theologians on the basic principles of destructive religious movements (questions and answers), methods of work, criteria for categorizing specialists in the field of rehabilitation of adherents of destructive and radical Islamic religious ideology have been developed and sent to the regions (Nurseitova).

Kazakhstan’s approach to the rehabilitation and reintegration of women and children returned from ISIS is more comprehensive and holistic compared to the previous experience of the rehabilitation of men and covers various aspects of rehabilitation such as social, legal, medical, psychological, socio-pedagogical (for children), educational (for women) and theological. The goals of the rehabilitation and reintegration of repatriates are to restore the civil status of repatriates, normalization of their physical, and psychological state, and provide them with individual and social opportunities for life in the society of Kazakhstan as well as theological explanations since the repatriates were exposed to the ideology of ISIS (Shapoval, p. 6).

The process of rehabilitation and reintegration of repatriates in Kazakhstan includes three stages. After the special repatriation operation, the first stage was a social adaptation, which was carried out in rehabilitation camps immediately after the arrival of repatriates in Kazakhstan. The second stage was rehabilitation and primary socialization, which took place in the regions on the basis of centers such as “Shans” (‘chance’) providing socio-psychological support. At this stage, the documentation of women and children was restored, psychological diagnostics and correction, medical and social assistance, and theological correction were provided. Much attention was paid to the socio-psychological and socio-pedagogical rehabilitation of children, preparing them for school. The third stage of rehabilitation was further socialization and gradual reintegration into society. The main emphasis in rehabilitation and reintegration at this stage was theological correction

and psychological counseling of women. It is important to note that the last stage of rehabilitation continues to the present day (Shapoval, p. 14).

For some women, socioeconomic deprivation was an important factor, but most of them faced acute socioeconomic problems upon their return since in order to emigrate to ISIS their husbands and fathers sold all their property, and considerable money was spent during life in ISIS. “Kareket” fund helped some women to solve the housing problem and has taught them professions that could bring daily income as hairdressing, confectionery, and shop assistants. According to the psychologist who directly worked with returnee women and children, the women were asked to take off their black clothes and adapt to the secular lifestyle. Some of them agreed and immediately decided to wear simple pants and skirts. But most of the time, women replaced their black hijabs with light-colored ones (Veber).

Before sending children to school, a meeting was held with school psychologists and teachers. The other school students were not told that the children were from Syria because they would receive them differently. However, after returning to the country and undergoing rehabilitation, these children are no different from others, and only at the beginning they were a little behind in the curriculum (Veber).

An important condition for successful deradicalization is the competence of a specialist in deradicalization. In the case of Kazakhstan, in addition to the employees of law enforcement and special bodies, theologians, psychologists, teachers, imams, doctors, relatives of the repatriates, and individual members of social organizations of different levels are all included in the activities of deradicalization of returnees.

CONCLUSIONS

From the moment Kazakhstan faced the problem of fighting internal terrorism, it has done essential work in forming its own model of fighting terrorism and religious extremism on the territory of the state. However, it should be noted that even if repatriated people demonstrate positive changes, still their further spiritual sovereignty needs to be strengthened and educated. Therefore, it is very important to provide religious education, communication, and emotional support to believing women. In this regard, official Islamic structures need to develop methods of women’s religious education and mentoring. Also, children who might remember past destructive events should be monitored and supported for further years, especially in adolescence.

Thus, the Kazakh experience was approved and encouraged by the European Parliament during the presentation of “Zhusan” and “Rusafa” operations (Ernst and Ahmetov). Also, F. Ní Aoláin, the UN special rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, noted:

Kazakhstan has illustrated that it is practical and realistic to bring out women and children, and the remaining responsibility to do so lies with multiple states (Ní Aoláin).

Therefore, Kazakhstan’s experience in the prevention of terrorist threats and saving those who have fallen into terrorist ideology, and providing immediate assistance can be a good asset in creating worldwide integrated measures in fighting against religious extremism and terrorism.

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