

# **KAZAKHSTAN: Kazakhstan plans to set up own school of Islamic studies**

Interfax (19.09.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2yB7tME> – The rapid growth of religious attitudes among the people and illiteracy about religious dogmas have produced an atmosphere more conducive to the influence of radical ideology in Kazakhstan, Minister for Religious Affairs and Civil Society Nurlan Yermekbayev said.

“The rapid growth of religious attitudes among the people over the past several years has moved faster than the formation of the culture and the ability to take a critical approach toward religious dogmas. As a result, some religious people have started prioritizing the literal observance of religious dictates over adherence to laws and secular morality,” Yermekbayev said at a session at the Majilis, the lower chamber of the Kazakh parliament.

This trend is a source of serious risks and conflicts, both within households and nationwide, he said.

“Second, external negative influence on our religious audience has increased. This is facilitated by the open information environment and processes of globalization. The Internet, social networks, and other means of communication exert massive ideological pressure on the population,” Yermekbayev said.

About 10% of the people living in Kazakhstan identify as atheists or agnostics, some 75% as believers not regularly observing religious rites, and about 15% as believers consistently observing all religious rites, he said.

“The level of religiosity is growing and provides more

opportunities for radical ideology's influence. What is dangerous is religious fanaticism of any teaching or denomination," he said.

"The only problem is religious illiteracy. We are not against faith as a source of spiritual and moral values," he said.

Kazakhstan needs to develop its own model of relations between the state and religion and its own school for the interpretation of Islam, without heeding or fearing criticism from abroad, he said.

"In our view, a Kazakh school of Islamic studies should be focused on spiritual and moral-ethical values, taking into consideration the ethnic and cultural-historical specifics of our poly-ethnic country, showing moderation and flexibility in dealing with outdated dogmas and their adaptation to modern realities, treating faith as a personal, intimate issue, and with kindness and tolerance toward everyone who shares different views and respect for and observance of the laws of a secular state," he said.

In this context, the ministry has been putting together a special group of researchers specializing in religious studies to develop a scientific basis for a Kazakh school of Islamic studies.

### ***HRWF Comment***

With the introduction of this new plan, Kazakhstan, a Muslim majority country, has decided to defend its traditional form of Islam and to combat the penetration of Salafist and Wahhabi ideologies that capture more and more segments of its society (70% are Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi school while Shias, Sufis and Ahmadis altogether are only 1% , and Christians, mainly Orthodox, make up 26% of the population). Creating an Institute of Islamic Studies is a sensible move to reduce religious illiteracy of Muslims and to make them less vulnerable to nefarious foreign religious ideologies or

recruitment by political Islamic movements like ISIS.

However, imprisoning (alleged) Salafists and Wahhabis because they represent a *potential* danger for human security and state security is not only inefficient but also counter-productive. They become emblematic martyrs and heroes and in prison they radicalize other detainees. HRWF therefore urges the Kazakh authorities to release (alleged) Salafists and Wahhabis as well as followers of the peaceful Tabligh Jamaat movement of Indian origin which does not use or advocate violence and does not call for the overthrow of the political regime in Kazakhstan or any other country either.

See HRWF Database of FORB Prisoners in Kazakhstan and other countries

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