



## Public and State Responses to ISIS Messaging: Kazakhstan

*Noah Tucker*

### Key findings

The Kazakh contingent in ISIS is unique in Central Asia because their ethnic battalion is the only one to be featured in global media outreach efforts from ISIS' al-hayat media wing. The latter has used the presence of ethnic Kazakh women and children – and particularly children training for combat or participating in what appeared to be a summary execution – to advance its narrative that the group is not only a multi-national, but a multi-generational movement that will supposedly train a new generation of “citizens” who will come of age in the self-declared Caliphate and will fight for its values. The al-hayat videos of Kazakh child soldiers successfully targeted a global audience using violence meant to shock the conscience of viewers and drew intense global media attention, but they also generated widespread anger and denunciation within Kazakhstan. Far from offering to “liberate” Kazakhs, many expressed a belief that ISIS was callously exploiting Kazakh children and turned to conspiracy theories to challenge the idea that any Kazakhs at all would find the group appealing and rejected the idea that ISIS represents Islam in any form with which they could identify.

The response by the government of Kazakhstan to public evidence that some of its citizens have joined ISIS differs sharply from other countries in the region. While its neighbors appear to often exaggerate ISIS appeal to their Muslim-majority populations and politicize the threat to target domestic opposition groups, Kazakhstan downplays the threat of ISIS to

**Noah Tucker** is a CAP associate and managing editor at Registan.net. He received a B.A. in History from Hope College and a M.A. in Russian, East European and Central Asian Studies at Harvard University. Noah is the lead researcher on the Central Asia Digital Islam Project and previously worked on the Harvard/Carnegie Islam project.

its territory and emphasizes measures to attempt to control even the distribution of firsthand sources that show Kazakh participation in jihadist conflict in Syria. While the Kazakh government has been forced to acknowledge that some of its citizens participate in the conflict, it prefers to highlight arrests of returned militants or alleged recruiters and highlight participation in joint international counter-terrorism efforts in order to reassure the public that the country is secure and is on the frontlines of a large international effort to fight a common external enemy. State narratives face a steep challenge from Russian media and information operations, which consistently portray ISIS as an imminent threat to Central Asia that can only be countered in cooperation with the Russian Federation. Russian media and information operations in Kazakhstan claim that ISIS is a U.S.-created puppet, a message that resonates with a significant number of Kazakh social media users.

ISIS's international media that used ethnic Kazakhs provoked overwhelming condemnation of the group from the public, often denying that Kazakhstani citizens participated in the videos at all and challenging the reality not only of the videos themselves, but as frequently happens in the rest of the region, questioning whether or not ISIS even exists. Independent Islamic groups online – including strict reformists and Salafists – promote strong anti-ISIS messages or ignore the group entirely, categorically rejecting any relationship between ISIS and the Islamic faith.

### **Kazakhs in ISIS media: Unexpected poster children for a new world order**

The Kazakhstani government estimates that between 250 and [400](#) of its citizens are in the ranks of ISIS, though estimates in the press vary widely, with some accounts putting the number [closer to 1,000](#). The Kazakh presence is unique in Central Asia because their ethnic battalion is the only one to be featured in global media outreach efforts from ISIS's al-hayat media wing, which has used the presence of ethnic Kazakh women and children – and particularly children training for combat or participating in what appeared to be a summary execution – to advance its narrative that ISIS is not only multi-national, but a multi-generational movement that will supposedly train a new generation of adherents (“citizens”) who come of age in the self-declared Caliphate and will fight for its values.

Unlike Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, which have each had rotating (careers cut short by death or serious injury) “celebrity commanders” or spokespeople within ISIS like Gulmurod Halimov, the Kazakhs in ISIS have produced very few recruiting messages of their own in Kazakh or targeted specifically to a Kazakhstani audience, and have no recognizable spokesman whose personality or story resonated or even created public debate. The al-hayat-produced videos of Kazakh child soldiers, in sharp contrast, successfully targeted a global audience using violence meant to shock the conscience of viewers and drew intense global media attention. It generated widespread anger and denunciation within Kazakhstan – far from offering to “liberate” Kazakhs, many expressed a belief [that ISIS was callously exploiting Kazakh children](#) and turned to conspiracy theories to challenge the idea that any Kazakhs at all would find the group appealing.



Although young Kazakh militants occasionally appeared in Arab-language media produced by ISIS to showcase the group's diversity, these videos drew little or no public attention in Kazakhstan and were confined for the most part to sequestered jihadist forums and social networks. In October 2013, however, al-Hayat released a [new video](#) in Kazakh and Russian with Arabic subtitles depicting the camp life and military preparations of around 150 Kazakh men, women and children; the video, though not primarily intended for a Kazakhstani audience, shook the country's social and news media, especially in response to an interpretation that the large group were all members of [a single extended family](#) that had defected together from Kazakhstan to the "Islamic State". This interpretation was quickly [rejected](#) by the KNB, who clarified that the group was unrelated families from many regions of the country. Two subsequent al-Hayat videos released in 2014 depicted the Kazakh children receiving militant indoctrination and weapons training. The third video in the Kazakh series appeared to show one of the same children around ten or eleven years old executing two "spies recruited by the Russian FSB," one of whom identified himself as a Kazakh, at point-blank range with a handgun.



Response to the "child soldier" videos was [immediate](#) and [outraged](#) world media, but in Kazakhstan immediate blocking of the videos themselves and even of some media sources covering the videos made it difficult for many Kazakhs [on social media to understand what was happening](#). Many social media users expressed anger and frustration both at ISIS for taking advantage of innocent children

and toward their own government for what appeared to be a wholesale denial that the incident occurred or that the people depicted in the video were Kazakh at all.

According to [scant investigative media reporting](#), and intelligence service press statements and [public portions of a confidential investigation](#) commissioned by the Kazakhstani government to examine patterns of recruitment, ISIS recruiting of Kazakhstani nationals appears [to follow no dominant pattern](#). Unlike in other Central Asian states where recruitment to the war in Syria and Iraq primarily attracts marginalized ethnic groups (such as Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan) or labor migrants working in Russia under harsh conditions, Kazakhstan's growing economy has not produced a large contingent of external migrant workers, although recruiting may follow a pattern that includes internal labor migration. Kazakhstani from a wide variety of regions, including from the capital city, [some with families](#), have joined the group or been [prosecuted for recruiting](#)— many appear to have been separated from hometown and family, and the group included some low-level security officials and a formerly prominent soccer player in the remote northwestern region of Uralsk, according to the Russian independent media outlet [Novaya gazeta](#) (though this revelation received little to no domestic coverage).

### **State responses contrast other approaches in the region**

The response by the government of Kazakhstan to public evidence that some of its citizens have joined ISIS differs sharply from other countries in the region. While its neighbors appear to often

exaggerate the appeal of ISIS to their Muslim-majority populations<sup>1</sup> and politicize the threat to target domestic opposition groups, Kazakhstan has embarked on a different course, offering a realistically low estimate of the threat of ISIS to the territory of the country and taking measures to attempt to control even the distribution of firsthand sources that show Kazakh participation in jihadist conflict in Syria or in other countries. The Kazakh government acknowledges that some of its citizens are recruited to participate in the conflict and has not pursued aggressive legal measures against media outlets that report information along these lines inside the country. However, the government prefers to highlight arrests of returned militants or small numbers of alleged recruiters – sometimes with what international monitors claim is ambiguous evidence supporting the charges – and its participation in joint international counter-terrorism efforts that help create the impression that the security situation is well in hand and the country is on the frontlines of a large international effort to fight a common (external) enemy.

The government of Kazakhstan has worked aggressively across agencies to prevent the spread of jihadist media but also, at times, to prevent independent reporting on Kazakhstani participation in the Syrian conflict from firsthand sources. It has issued warnings to domestic media sources about possible prosecution if they covered the child soldier videos. The prosecutor's office also pressed the Kyrgyzstani government to shut down coverage there of the fist video, prompting Bishkek to temporarily close down the website for one of the most [influential independent online media sources, Kloop.kg](#). Social media users reported that much of the [secondary coverage of the videos in international media](#) (which sharply condemned the violence) was blocked in Kazakhstan. Videos of Kazakh jihadists have been almost completely wiped from international hosting sites like YouTube and are much more difficult to locate than those featuring citizens of other Central Asian countries, which may likely reflect behind-the-scenes pressure from Kazakhstani government representatives: after the [U.S.-based video sharing site Vimeo failed to remove](#) all jihadist content, the government announced that according to a decision by an Almaty district court in September 2015, the entire service would be blocked in Kazakhstan until the objectionable content is removed.

The Kazakhstani government further promotes media coverage of new laws expanding to counter extremist recruiting and [arrests of former militants who return](#), shows confidence that it has [identified the families that took children to Syria](#) and Iraq and will work to return them, and commissioned a major (but not public) study of recruiting patterns by one of its leading scholars, Erlan Karin. Kazakhstan similarly joined the U.S. Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) efforts led by the Obama Administration, hosting the regional CVE conference in June 2015 in cooperation with the United States and other international partners and ensuring ample media coverage for the conference. By August 2015, the KNB claimed it had [prevented five ISIS-related terrorist](#) incidents since the beginning of 2014 and in 2015 alone [prosecuted 45 people](#) and was investigating 40 others for recruiting related to the Syrian conflict. Few details of these alleged planned attacks or recruiting efforts are ever made public, but the state ensures that results are visible to the public.

Although a few rank-and-file politicians [raised alarms](#) after the release of the child soldier videos, academic, high-ranking member of the President's Nur Otan party and executive-appointed head of the state's Institute for Strategic Studies Erlan Karin said directly that ISIS is not a real threat to Kazakhstan. In [an extensive October 2015 interview](#) with Vlast.kz that he publicized through his own influential social media accounts, Karin described ISIS as a "boogeyman" [*strashilka*] that is "useful at the moment for everyone... I have always said: the danger of ISIS is not that militants

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<sup>1</sup> In Kazakhstan the population identifies as Muslim by a healthy majority but [only 18% of Muslims describe Islam as "very important" to their lives](#), only 2% report that they pray five times a day, and only some 4% pray once or more each day according to the Pew Religious Values Survey in 2012.

from this group from Central Asia could return and organize terrorist acts – that threat exists, but it is not particularly likely. The incursion of ISIS forces into Central Asia is an even less likely scenario. The most dangerous [scenario] is that the constant peddling of the “ISIS factor” (including in the domestic context) could facilitate the self-activation of radical internal sleeper cells. In our country, in Russia, in Europe, anywhere. They can be inspired by the so-called ‘success’ [of ISIS] and attempt to follow the ‘big league’ [*raskruchennyi*] example.”



A stock illustration from the faux-think tank (and identified Russian information operation) the Center for Analysis of Terrorist Threats in Kazakhstan, from one of dozens of articles unsubtly [attributing all global terrorism and conflict to U.S. greed](#).

**...But Russia pushes the threat from ISIS and the United States**

[Russian media, state outlets, politicians, “experts,” and information operations](#), by contrast, emphasize the [allegedly imminent threat of ISIS to Kazakhstan’s physical and “information” security](#), a narrative that clashes with or even criticizes the state’s narrative that promotes an image of stability and control. Russian narratives [champion the role of Moscow in opposing ISIS](#) – particularly now that the [bombing](#)

[campaign in Syria has begun](#) – and pushes Kazakhstan [to participate in and support Russia-led anti-terror efforts](#), claiming that Kazakhstan is [“uniquely vulnerable” to terrorist organizations because of its oil and uranium resources](#). As in the rest of the region, Russian information operations consistently attempt to connect threats of ISIS to the United States. Russian media permeates Kazakh social media, and conspiracy theories claiming that ISIS is a Western plot to “demonize Muslims” resonate with some in the Kazakh environment – even state-supported messaging in Kazakhstan, like the [“Kazakhstan Anti-Terror”](#) website sponsored in part by the Culture and Information Ministry, [promotes material from Russian information operations](#) that accuse the United States of founding al-Qaida and other terrorist organizations.

Online discussion in Kazakhstan is shaped in part by identifiable Russian influence operations, some directly connected to government, such as the [Center for Analysis of Terrorist Threats in Kazakhstan](#) or the [Young Eurasia Movement](#), and by Russian state-supported media that saturates the information environment in Kazakhstan, including television. Russian sources have a considerable advantage on Kazakh social media: According to the OpenNet initiative, as of 2010, [94% of all Internet activity in Kazakhstan](#) takes place in the



Provocative images created to illustrate conspiracy theories continue to frequently crossover [from the state-sponsored Russian media](#) into Central Asian [social media](#).

Russian language, and only around six percent of .kz registered domains are actually hosted in Kazakhstan.<sup>2</sup>

Social media discussions about ISIS incorporate Russian narratives and Russia media sources so frequently that it is almost impossible to distinguish between users who are part of – or influenced by – information operations and those who simply find that Russian sources provide convenient “evidence” for conspiracies they already believe. A new anonymous YouTube Channel, “Kazakh Security,” appeared in September 2015 just before the announcement of Russian [air force operations in Syria](#). The channel posted dozens of videos each week, mixing [identifiable Russian information operations](#) and seemingly amateur material that all promote the idea that Russia’s Syrian engagement will result in [a direct confrontation with the United States](#) (that Russia will win). At the same time the channel promoted material expressing Kazakh nationalist anger against Russian nationalist politicians like Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and celebrating [Kazakhstani military might](#) and Kazakh national identity and speeches by President Nazarbayev – the channel was anonymously created and disappeared within less than 90 days, making it impossible to judge whether it was a genuine response from a patriotic Kazakhstani citizen or a Russia-sponsored trolling operation. That ambiguity is powerful, especially when social media users encounter only one item at a time from the vast catalogue posted by this and similar profiles.

### **Public and religious responses**

The Kazakh government has frequently cited online recruiting as the primary vector by which Kazakhstani citizens are in danger of being pulled into the Syrian conflict. Yet, the Digital Islam Project has not identify a social media account, website, or other online resource dedicated specifically to recruiting Kazakhstani citizens to fight in Syria – whether for ISIS or any other group – in sharp contrast to multiple resources observed for Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Kyrgyzstanis, who are recruited into the conflict in roughly similar numbers and have readily identifiable jihadist social media networks.

Public responses to ISIS’ international media that used ethnic Kazakhs provoked overwhelming condemnation of the group, often denying that Kazakhstani citizens participated in the videos at all and challenging the reality not only of the videos themselves, but, as frequently happens in the rest of the region, questioning whether or not ISIS even exists. Social and online media reacted especially to the Kazakh “child executioner” video with a wide variety of conspiracy responses. Predominant among them was that the video was a “fake” and the execution itself was staged – commenters often cited the [lack of visible blood and blood spatter](#) after the close-range gunshots – but social media users differed widely about who they suspected “faked” the video and why.

Many Kazakh nationalists claimed immediately that the entire operation was either faked in Russia or the fault of Russians, citing information operations and Russian intelligence involvement in Ukraine; other Kazakh nationalists denied that any of the participants in the video were “true Kazakhs,” offering a detailed analysis of family trees when the “FSB spy” was purportedly identified as a Kazakhstani himself and [alleging racial miscegenation and Hollywood film propaganda](#). As in Kyrgyzstan in response to ISIS media there, many users cited the “professional production values” as purported evidence that the film could not have been produced by a terrorist organization.

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted, however, that much of the indigenous online discourse about Islam happens in Kazakh on principle, and robust Muslim networks and Islamic devotional material exist in Kazakh. Kazakh nationalist groups, who are active across the nation and use social media to coordinate their discourse and sometimes mobilize protests, similarly communicate exclusively in the Kazakh language.

Similar again to Kyrgyzstan, most users used conspiracy and “armchair expertise” to reject potentially new information that might challenge the beliefs they already held. With so many conflicting narratives and interpretations available, “evidence” is rarely hard to find.

Some independent Islamic groups online – including strict reformists – promote strong anti-ISIS messages, while popular Islamic media companies, such as Asyl Arna, and the official Kazakhstani Muftiate make little mention of ISIS. These organizations' silence may be meant to distance what they perceive as “real Islam” from ISIS and other violent groups. Some analysts have warned that in spite of the relative freedom with which strict scripturalist Muslims have been able to practice their religion in Kazakhstan in harmony with the government and security services, fear of ISIS influence and tightening restrictions on religious practice increase public [suspicion and potential government targeting of all “non-traditional” religions as “extremism.”](#)

Both [state-supported and independent](#) Islamic media outlets have made a concerted effort to warn their followers about the dangers of ISIS and other jihadist groups. One such site, Religia.kz, received a question from readers in July amid reports in the Russian media that ISIS was preparing to invade Central Asia about whether or not Kazakhstani should take up arms against them if they reach Kazakhstan given that Muslims are forbidden from killing other Muslims. [The administrator responded curtly](#) that ISIS was a sect that refused to obey the most fundamental rules of Sharia and that while they were “unlikely” to invade anytime soon, all Kazakhstani Muslims could “resist them bravely and fight for your homeland and your religion.” Groups dedicated to discussing extremism from a religious perspective are not, however, [immune to the same conspiracy theories that dominate other forums](#), frequently citing alleged persecution against Muslims and conspiracies – ubiquitous in the Russian media – ISIS and other Islamist terrorist groups are “projects of America” or Israel created by “Islamophobes” to turn global opinion against Muslims and justify military incursions into Muslim-majority countries.



A leading [user-submitted nomination](#) in a nationwide “art against extremism” contest, sponsored in part by the General Prosecutor’s office. The graphic advises Kazakhstani not to fall pretty to allegedly U.S. and Israel sponsored terrorist groups or to the Salafi movement depicted here as a secret creation of Israel, but instead to rely on a fictional all-star team of Hanafi scholars and website administrators for reliable advice. Another leading nomination in the documentary film category equates the activities of [Jehovah’s Witnesses](#) in Kazakhstan to the same kind of threatening extremism represented by ISIS recruiters.

**Policy takeaways**

The Kazakhstani state has made it clear that it intends to pursue a multilateral approach to security cooperation, especially in response to any potential effects of the Syrian/Iraqi conflict and ISIS recruiting efforts. Much of the state-supported Russian language media, if not the Russian state and its officials themselves, appear to have an interest in undermining that cooperation by resonant conspiracy theories that claim the United States and other Western partners are the cause or the supporters of ISIS and other militant Islamist organizations. International partners should continue to engage the Kazakhstani government and public and assist in efforts to counteract conspiracy theories and demonstrate genuine partnership towards common goals.

The Kazakhstani government should also pay close attention to the factors that may cause some of its citizens to become disenfranchised and alienated, and in the process potentially vulnerable to extremist recruitment. The state and security services must carefully differentiate between violent extremist groups and peaceful citizens whose beliefs differ from the mainstream – both Muslims and non-Muslims – according to the dictates of their conscience. By policing religious or political beliefs and attempting to intervene in non-violent theological debates the state runs the risk of alienating citizens and creating public grievances instead of uniting against a common external enemy like ISIS that has little or no purchase among the public. Kazakhstan would do well to avoid the processes by which many of its neighboring states have created enemies within their own population by attempting to rigorously police expressions of faith. Attempting to police Jehovah's Witnesses, ISIS supporters, Tablighi Jamaat members or even atheists in roughly the same way, simply on the grounds that all are "non-traditional ideologies," is not only inefficient and pointless, but may well in the long run be counterproductive to Kazakhstan's anti-terrorist efforts, not to mention development of a free, prosperous and inclusive society.