

*Islamic Militance and the Uighur of Kazakhstan:
Recommendations for U.S. Policy*

Professor Andreas Borgeas

Professor of International & Comparative Law,
San Joaquin College of Law; Fulbright Alumnus

ISLAMIC MILITANCY AND THE UIGHUR OF KAZAKHSTAN: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

By Professor Andreas Borgeas

Abstract

Kazakhstan is a country with enormous strategic opportunities. Pursuing a secular, multi-vectored foreign policy, which requires constant calibration between China, Russia and the US, Kazakhstan is a major player in the energy markets and has emerged as the dominant power in Central Asia. Understanding Kazakhstan's security and economic relations with China, especially in terms of energy deals, counterterrorism cooperation, and Uighur relations, is essential towards advancing US strategic interests in the region.

This research sought to examine the potential for the spread of Islamic militancy amongst the Uighur of Kazakhstan. The extent to which extremists in Kazakhstan pose a realistic threat to Kazakhstan and China's national security were determined by assessing the religious traditions and ideological motivations of the Uighur with their present compatibility for Islamic militancy; specifically, whether the prevailing Islamic practice has been made fundamental, and, if an Uighur identity exists, whether it is bound by Islamic ambitions that may manifest in widespread terrorist activity. The results of these findings were used to determine, ultimately, whether militant Islam in Kazakhstan is a fringe and localized presence, or if it has sufficient appeal for popular support.

The author concludes that the threat of Islamic militancy amongst the Uighur in the Republic of Kazakhstan will likely remain a fringe and localized threat, and does not have sufficient appeal for popular support. The historically moderate Sufism of the Hanafi sect is unlikely to be compatible in Kazakhstan with the imported strains of fundamentalist Islam. While significant sympathies may exist with their Xinjiang counterparts, Uighur-Kazakhs do not largely identify themselves in an actionable way with part of any unrealized Uighuristan or East Turkestan community, in part because Uighur-Kazakhs are divided by deep ideological and identity differences. Finally, it is likely that China's massive investment into the Kazakh energy market will inevitably force a long term security alignment with Beijing.

Yet the author suspects Kazakhstan's economic capabilities and the multi-vectored balance it attempts to seek with its neighbors and other powers, means it will likely not allow itself to become a subordinate of Beijing.

Recommendations for US Policy Community

The author makes the following recommendations for the U.S. policy community: to encourage the legalization in Kazakhstan of political parties associated with the Islamic faith; to encourage Kazakhstan to allow more for the study of Islam, and for efforts to be made by the state to help financially support these institutions; to encourage Kazakhstan to initiate a more accountable process before extraditing Uighur-Kazakhs to China; and to encourage Kazakhstan to implement more preventive rather than suppressive tactics in its efforts to combat terrorism.