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GEOPOLITICAL STRATEGY OF TURKEY'S RELIGIOUS POLICY: FEATURES OF INFLUENCE ON THE SOCIO-CULTURAL SPACE OF KAZAKHSTAN

This study aims to analyze Turkey's geopolitical strategy in religious policy in Kazakhstan, with a focus on the mechanisms for disseminating the Turkish model of Islam through cultural and educational initiatives. The objective of the research is to identify the distinctive features of Turkey's religious policy influence, particularly through the system of Kazakh-Turkish lyceums, on Kazakhstan's sociocultural space and the formation of religious-ideological identity under external cultural and religious influence. The research tasks include studying the evolution of Turkey's religious policy in Kazakhstan, identifying key factors contributing to the spread of Turkish ideology and education in the region, and analyzing the socio-cultural and political consequences of these processes for Kazakhstani society. The research methodology is based on a comprehensive interdisciplinary approach, combining theoretical and empirical methods. Content analysis is employed to examine religious and educational materials, as well as documents related to Turkey's foreign policy and cultural initiatives in Kazakhstan. Comparative analysis is used to assess the role of various cultural and educational institutions and to compare Turkey's influence in Kazakhstan with other regions of Central Asia. Additionally, empirical research, including expert interviews and analysis of Kazakh-Turkish lyceums' activities, reveals the extent of integration of the Turkish educational model and religious ideology into Kazakhstan's educational and cultural space. The study's findings are aimed at providing a deeper understanding of the impact of Turkey's religious and cultural policies on social transformation processes in Kazakhstan and its sociocultural orientations in a globalizing world.

Keywords: Turkey's religious policy, Kazakh-Turkish lyceums, Islam, educational initiatives, soft power

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Түркияның діни саясатының геосаяси стратегиясы: Қазақстанның әлеуметтік-мәдени кеңістігіне әсер ету ерекшеліктері

Бұл зерттеу Түркияның Қазақстандағы діни саясатының геосаяси стратегиясын талдауға бағытталған, оның ішінде исламның Түркияның моделін мәдени және білім беру бастамалары арқылы тарату механизмдеріне ерекше назар аударылған. Жұмыстың мақсаты – Қазақстанның әлеуметтік-мәдени кеңістігіне түрік діни саясатының, атап айтқанда қазақ-түрік лицейлері жүйесі арқылы әсер ету ерекшеліктерін анықтау, сондай-ақ сыртқы мәдени және діни ықпал жағдайында діни-идеологиялық бірегейліктің қалыптасуын зерттеу. Зерттеудің міндеттері: Қазақстандағы Түркияның діни саясатының эволюциясын зерделеу, аймақта түрік идеологиясы мен білім беру жүйесінің таралуына ықпал ететін негізгі факторларды анықтау, сондай-ақ осы процестердің қазақстандық қоғамның әлеуметтік-мәдени және саяси салдарына талдау жасау. Зерттеу әдістемесі теориялық және эмпирикалық әдістерді қамтитын кешенді пәнаралық тәсілге негізделген. Зерттеуде діни және білім беру материалдарына, сондай-ақ Түркияның сыртқы саясаты мен Қазақстандағы мәдени бастамаларына қатысты құжаттарға контент-талдау жүргізілді. Салыстырмалы талдау әртүрлі мәдени және білім беру институттарының рөлін бағалау, сондай-ақ Қазақстандағы түрік ықпалын Орталық Азияның басқа өңірлерімен салыстыру үшін қолданылды. Сонымен қатар, сарапшылармен жүргізілген сұхбаттар мен қазақ-түрік лицейлерінің қызметін талдауды қамтитын эмпирикалық зерттеу түрік білім беру моделі мен діни идеологиясының Қазақстанның білім беру және мәдени кеңістігіне ену деңгейін айқындауға мүмкіндік берді. Зерттеу нәтижелері Түркияның діни және мәдени саясатының

Қазақстандағы әлеуметтік өзгерістерге және жаһандану жағдайындағы әлеуметтік-мәдени бағдарларға ықпалын тереңірек түсінуге бағытталған.

Түйін сөздер: Түркияның діни саясаты, қазақ-түрік лицейлері, ислам, білім беру бастамалары, жұмсақ күш

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Геополитическая стратегия религиозной политики Турции: особенности влияния на социокультурное пространство Казахстана

Исследование направлено на анализ геополитической стратегии религиозной политики Турции в Казахстане, с акцентом на механизмы распространения турецкой модели ислама через культурные и образовательные инициативы. Целью работы является выявление особенностей влияния турецкой религиозной политики, в частности, через систему казахско-турецких лицеев, на социокультурное пространство Казахстана и формирование религиозно-идеологической идентичности в условиях внешнего культурного и религиозного воздействия. Задачи исследования заключаются в изучении эволюции турецкой религиозной политики в Казахстане, определении ключевых факторов, способствующих распространению турецкой идеологии и образования в регионе, а также анализе социально-культурных и политических последствий этих процессов для казахстанского общества. Методология исследования базируется на комплексном междисциплинарном подходе, который включает в себя теоретические и эмпирические методы. В работе применяется контент-анализ для изучения религиозных и образовательных материалов, а также документов, касающихся турецкой внешней политики и культурных инициатив в Казахстане. Сравнительный анализ используется для оценки роли различных культурных и образовательных институтов, а также для сопоставления турецкого влияния в Казахстане с другими регионами Центральной Азии. Кроме того, эмпирическое исследование, включающее интервью с экспертами и анализ деятельности казахско-турецких лицеев, позволяет выявить степень интеграции турецкой образовательной модели и религиозной идеологии в образовательное и культурное пространство Казахстана. Результаты исследования направлены на более глубокое понимание воздействия религиозной и культурной политики Турции на процессы социальной трансформации в Казахстане и его социокультурные ориентиры в условиях глобализирующегося мира.

Ключевые слова: религиозная политика Турции, казахско-турецкие лицеи, ислам, образовательные инициативы, мягкая сила

Introduction

Turkey's religious policy in Kazakhstan constitutes a significant element of its geopolitical strategy, aimed at promoting a secular model of Islam developed through the reforms of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. This influence is exerted through instruments of *soft power*, including educational programs, cultural exchanges, and the activities of organizations such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) and the *Maarif* Foundation (Chedia, 2023). Turkey actively fosters educational and cultural ties with Kazakhstan, offering opportunities for Central Asian students to study at Turkish universities, thereby facilitating the dissemination of Turkish culture and its religious model. A notable example of this is Turkey's high popularity as an educational destination: approximately 25% of Kazakh students studying abroad choose Turkey, reflecting significant interest in Turkey's educational and religious approach. Consequently, Turkey's religious policy

in Kazakhstan is clearly oriented towards strengthening its cultural and religious influence, extending beyond educational initiatives to include the promotion of secular Islam aligned with the principles of Turkish modernization. This influence contributes to shaping a positive image of Turkey as a leading power in the Muslim world while reinforcing cultural ties between the two nations (World Education Services, 2021).

Kazakhstan officially adheres to the principle of a secular state, which limits the possibilities for direct intervention by external actors in the country's religious affairs. However, Turkey effectively utilizes non-governmental organizations, educational initiatives, and cultural exchanges to advance its interests. Turkish religious and educational institutions, such as the *Diyanet* Foundation and various Turkish schools, play a significant role in promoting Sunni Islam of the Hanafi madhhab, a tradition historically close to Kazakh society. Particular

emphasis is placed on constructing mosques, training religious personnel, and providing educational scholarships for Kazakh students at Turkish universities. A report by the International Center for Religious Studies highlights that over the past two decades, the number of organizations associated with Turkey in Kazakhstan has grown significantly. This expansion has strengthened cultural and religious ties while contributing to Turkey's positive image as a protector of Islamic values in Central Asia (Ak-gün, 2022).

Turkey's approach to religious policy in Kazakhstan is a well-thought-out and multifaceted effort aimed at expanding its cultural and spiritual influence. By promoting Sunni Islam of the Hanafi School – deeply rooted in Kazakhstan's own religious traditions – Turkey positions itself as both a spiritual and cultural leader among the Turkic nations of the region.

The Directorate of Religious Affairs is central to Turkey's approach to religious matters, a governmental body instrumental in both formulating and executing its religious endeavors abroad. Via this organization, Turkey supports the building of mosques, religious academies (madrasahs), and community hubs, concurrently offering financial aid to students from Kazakhstan pursuing religious studies at Turkish institutions of higher learning. A key component of this policy is the training of religious leaders (imams), who, upon completing their studies, return to Kazakhstan to continue their work in line with the Turkish interpretation of Sunni Islam (Diyanet İşleri Başkanı Erbaş, 2024). Cultural diplomacy also serves as a crucial tool in Turkey's efforts to consolidate its religious influence. Numerous cultural events, conferences, and symposia supported by Turkish foundations contribute to the popularization of Islamic values as interpreted by Turkey. Additionally, significant attention is given to the translation and dissemination of religious literature, further embedding Turkey's presence in Kazakhstan's religious sphere.

Justification of the choice of articles and goals and objectives

One of the main ideological drivers behind Turkey's religious policy is the blend of Neo-Ottomanism and Pan-Turkism as a vision that emphasizes the cultural and spiritual bonds among Turkic peoples based on their shared history. This idea resonates particularly well with certain segments of Kazakh

society, especially in regions that have historically felt closer to the Ottoman legacy.

Yet, Turkey's religious outreach in Kazakhstan runs into real challenges. Given Kazakhstan's firm secular stance, the government keeps a close watch on foreign religious influences. This cautious approach often leads to tighter controls on activities tied to outside actors. In response, Turkey has shifted gears, leaning more on cultural programs and civil society partnerships to keep its presence strong – but more discreetly.

This study set out to closely examine Turkey's religious diplomacy in Kazakhstan and how it's influencing the country's cultural and religious fabric. The research paid special attention to the soft power strategies used – think education, humanitarian projects, and ideological messaging – as tools for shaping religious views. Of particular focus were the networks linked to the Fethullah Gülen movement, whose activities in Kazakhstan stretch far beyond classrooms into media, culture, and community work.

The study also took a hard look at the risks this religious diplomacy could pose to Kazakhstan's secular model. It analyzed how Kazakh authorities have responded with legal and institutional guardrails, and how Turkey has adapted its strategies accordingly. In the end, the findings reveal a complex, evolving picture of religious influence – quiet, strategic, and deeply embedded in soft power networks. And while the changes may be subtle, they're undeniably reshaping the contours of Kazakhstan's religious landscape.

Scientific research methodology

To truly grasp how Turkey is shaping Kazakhstan's cultural and social landscape, it's essential to look at the issue from multiple angles. This study adopts a broad, multidisciplinary approach – drawing on religious studies, political science, sociology, cultural studies, and history – to offer a more comprehensive understanding of Turkey's influence. This blend of perspectives helps illuminate not just the political aspects of Turkey's engagement, but also its softer, culturally rooted efforts.

The research combines both traditional and contemporary methods. It analyzes academic literature and official documents while also incorporating sociological surveys, expert interviews, and fieldwork. This mix of approaches adds depth and real-world grounding to the analysis, helping to show how Turkey's influence plays out in everyday contexts.

To interpret Turkey's strategies, the study relies on theories of cultural diplomacy and soft power—viewing influence not as something imposed, but as a gradual diffusion of ideas, values, and practices. Methodologically, it uses content analysis, comparative research, and sociological observation. This involves closely examining educational materials, media discourse, and religious messaging; comparing Turkey's influence in Kazakhstan with trends in other Central Asian countries; and studying how Kazakh society receives and responds to these cultural imports.

Primary sources for this research include scholarly works and materials focused on secularism and Islamic modernism in Turkey. Notably, the work of Çınar Akgün offers important insights into the evolution of Turkey's religious policy and its impact on the Central Asian region. Akgün analyzes shifts in Turkey's political and religious ideologies – particularly the promotion of moderate Islam alongside democratic values— and how these changes are projected abroad (Çınar, 2006: 85-88).

By combining diverse research tools and theoretical frameworks, this study explores how Turkey's geopolitical ambitions and religious diplomacy are influencing Kazakhstan's sociocultural identity. At the same time, it examines the deeper structural and contextual forces that either facilitate or constrain this influence.

Under the AKP's leadership, Turkey has leaned into Islamic values while still presenting itself as a country where faith and democracy can go hand in hand. This balance shows up clearly in its outreach to Central Asia – especially in Kazakhstan. Through initiatives like Kazakh-Turkish schools and universities, Turkey isn't just offering education – it's sharing a worldview. These schools go beyond textbooks; they're spaces where ideas like tolerance, peaceful living, and a sense of social duty are actively nurtured. They serve as platforms for integrating Kazakhstan's cultural and religious traditions with Turkey's model of moderate Islam. Through its cultural initiatives, Turkey promotes multiculturalism and religious diversity, fostering mutual understanding among Kazakhstan's various ethno-religious groups. This strategic engagement not only enhances bilateral ties but also positions Turkey as a cultural and spiritual bridge between Central Asia and the broader Muslim world (Safarov, 2017: 120-132).

Kazakhstan, as a multi-confessional state, occupies a unique position where different religious currents, including both Sunni and Shia Islam, interact

and intersect within the framework of the national religious policy (Çınar, 2006: 91-94). In its pursuit of maintaining the secular character of the state, Kazakhstan limits the involvement of foreign religious powers in its political and cultural spheres. Nevertheless, Turkey's influence in the domains of education and cultural exchange remains substantial. By advancing its model of secular Islam, Turkey exerts its impact through educational institutions that prioritize the promotion of tolerance, peaceful coexistence, and social responsibility, thereby shaping the socio-cultural and religious dynamics within Kazakhstan (Özdemir, 2021).

Thus, Turkey's geopolitical strategy in religious policy exerts significant influence on the socio-cultural landscape of Kazakhstan. Turkey promotes a model of secular Islam that integrates with democratic values. This approach impacts Kazakhstan's religious policy, contributing to the formation of a layered religious and cultural identity, where various cultural and religious traditions are integrated.

Within the framework of Kazakhstan's Comprehensive Plan for the Implementation of State Religious Policy for 2021–2023, a clear trend toward an increase in the number of students enrolled in religious educational institutions both domestically and abroad is observed, reflecting a growing interest in religious education. Despite the presence of 13 religious institutions in Kazakhstan, primarily Islamic in orientation, a significant number of citizens continue to pursue theological education in countries such as Egypt, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, indicating Kazakhstan's students' alignment with international standards and high theological education traditions. However, the lack of a clear system for monitoring and regulating educational processes both at the national and international levels poses threats to religious security, particularly with regard to the education of 113 students in questionable institutions. This highlights the need for institutional reforms aimed at establishing a quality control system for education to minimize risks from extremist influences and ensure the high-level training of spiritual leaders within the framework of state religious policy (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2020).

Main part

A notable additional aspect is the presence of 3,826 registered religious organizations representing 18 distinct confessions, further emphasizing the multi-confessional nature and religious diversity of

Kazakhstan. Thus, while the population demonstrates a high degree of religiosity, there exists a pressing need for the continued harmonization of secular and religious institutions. This necessitates the formulation of sophisticated mechanisms to safeguard religious freedom while taking into account the plurality of religious affiliations and practices, thereby ensuring a balanced and inclusive approach to state-religion relations (Mukhit, 2021).

Currently, Turkey plays a pivotal role in shaping Kazakhstan's religious policy, a relationship rooted in its strategic objective to reinforce connections with Turkic-speaking nations and establish itself as a key hub for Islamic modernization. As part of its growing partnership with Kazakhstan, Turkey has played a hands-on role in shaping the country's religious infrastructure. This includes everything from building mosques to training staff for religious institutions. Turkish scholars frequently participate in educating Kazakh imams and madrasa teachers – a move that not only strengthens religious ties but also subtly promotes Turkey's preferred interpretations of Islamic practice and tradition, in line with its wider geopolitical aims (Satpayev, 2019). Perhaps the most striking example of this cooperation is the creation and growth of the International Kazakh-Turkish University, along with the network of Kazakh-Turkish lyceums. These educational projects aren't just about schooling – they represent a calculated effort by Turkey to expand its influence in Kazakhstan's cultural and religious spheres. Such collaboration plays a pivotal role in the dissemination of Turkey's model of Islamic modernization within Kazakhstan. However, this growing partnership raises critical concerns regarding the equilibrium between external religious influence and the imperative to maintain the country's religious autonomy, so as to prevent an over-reliance on foreign ideologies and safeguard Kazakhstan's distinctive religious identity (Laumulin, 2019).

Over the past three decades, Turkey's influence on Kazakhstan's Islamic sphere has been primarily mediated through both state and non-state channels, each fulfilling distinct functions. State institutions, notably the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), initiated their engagement by providing support to local clergy and fostering educational initiatives, which significantly facilitated the establishment of trust within Kazakhstan's religious community (in Turkish universities). A key component of this policy is the training of religious leaders (imams), who, upon completing their studies, return to Kazakhstan to continue their work in

line with the Turkish interpretation of Sunni Islam (Diyanet İşleri Başkanı Erbaş, 2024). The creation of an inter-Islamic network called the Eurasian Islamic Council in 1995 was a significant step toward connecting the Muslim communities of the area. Despite that the Council was dissolved in 2012, Turkey's contribution to the Islamic education and cultural exchange is still vivid. Turkey next year will also continue to host scores of educational programs, seminars, and meetings aimed at promoting a religious profile that is in line with a moderate and secular version of Islam. Yet this engagement is not without its difficulties, for what Turkey offers is often seen as a tool to spread its geopolitical influence, and this has led many to question how this balance is struck between religious cooperation and political interests.

Besides formal institutions, the influence from Turkish nongovernmental organizations in Kazakhstan, such as those established by Süleyman Tunahan and Fethullah Gülen, has been pivotal to the formation of the Islamic and educational landscapes in the country. The «Hizmet» movement, spearheaded by Gülen, was instrumental in establishing a network of educational institutions that provided high-quality education and social services, thereby gaining significant popularity among Kazakhstan's populace. However, it gradually became apparent that, beyond their educational mission, these organizations also functioned as conduits for promoting specific ideological and political agendas. The influence of these entities extended beyond the realm of religious education, influencing broader socio-political dimensions, which prompted a nuanced response from the Kazakhstani authorities. It is essential to underscore that an effective religious policy in Kazakhstan must be based on a clear demarcation of the limits of external influence in relation to national interests, fostering conditions for constructive dialogue, while simultaneously ensuring control over the processes of religious education and enlightenment to preserve national sovereignty and identity (Garbuzarova, 2023: 16-17).

In recent years, the influence of Turkish religious organizations in Kazakhstan has undergone substantial transformations. During the early 2000s, Gülenist networks, operating under the auspices of the Fethullah Gülen movement, functioned as pivotal instruments of Turkish soft power in Central Asia, facilitating educational, cultural, and religious exchanges. These organizations were perceived as key vectors for disseminating a version of Islam aligned with moderate, secular ideals, which resonated with

Kazakhstan's ongoing efforts to balance its religious diversity and secular state structure. However, as geopolitical dynamics shifted, particularly following the deterioration of relations between Turkey and the Gülen movement, the role and prominence of these organizations in Kazakhstan significantly waned. While Kazakhstan, in contrast to other Central Asian states, refrained from shutting down Gülen-affiliated institutions, their influence diminished as the broader political context shifted, especially with the consolidation of power by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey, which led to an increasing alignment of its religious policies with more conservative forms of Islam (Aidarkhanova, 2018).

Realizing these achievements, Turkey has been regularly suggesting the idea of the implementation of a moderate form of Islam in Kazakhstan that is still in line with the values of secularism and tolerance. Committing to the task without any shifts, the Religious Affairs Directorate (Diyanet) and other Turkish NGOs entitling their work with religious education and cultural diplomacy are also major contributors to the success of this venture. Unfortunately, the described mechanism has been subject to rather serious resistance, in particular, when signs of the growingly dependent attitude of Kazakhstan's authorities towards outer factors have appeared. The last point is mainly evidenced through the fact that Kazakhstan's government has developed negative perceptions about Turkish religious undercurrents where the latter promote the more conservative forms of Islam. This is seen as a potential trigger for political manipulation and radicalism. Moreover, while Turkish NGOs continue their educational and cultural programs, other forms of political and religious influence have been increasingly curtailed by the Kazakh government, reflecting a broader strategy of limiting external religious influence. Within the context of the evolving geopolitical situation, Turkey's role remains influential, but its capacity to shape Kazakhstan's religious and cultural landscape has been tempered by both internal and external political pressures, as well as growing concerns over radicalization and the potential for the spread of extremist ideologies (World Education Services, 2021).

Since 2002, within the framework of an agreement between the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan and Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), Kazakh imams have participated in two-month professional development courses in Turkey. For instance, in 2017, 30

imams from Kazakhstan were sent for training in the city of Balıkesir, and by 2021, this number had increased to 64, who received training at the prestigious «Haseki» Academy under the bilateral agreement. The Diyanet, a key state body responsible for managing the propagation of Sunni Islam outside of Turkey, played a central role in this process. In accordance with Turkey's secular constitution, the clergy were paid as civil servants, and the Diyanet, which reported directly to the Prime Minister, employed approximately 105,000 personnel. Its annual budget surpassed the combined financial allocations of ministries such as Foreign Affairs, Energy, and Environment. This institutional arrangement functioned as a vital tool for the execution of Turkey's cultural-religious diplomacy in Central Asia, aiming to consolidate its influence in the Islamic domain. Through religious and educational initiatives, Turkey sought to fortify its presence in the region while simultaneously balancing the secular foundations of its own state with the strategic promotion of religious identity abroad (Atamanov, 2022).

The Turkish Religious Foundation (TDV) and the Directorate of Religious Affairs of Turkey (Diyanet) supported the distribution of 3,515 copies of the Holy Quran in Kazakhstan to those finishing the Quran study courses, with the presence of Ibrahim Uslu, Deputy Chairman of Turkey's Supreme Board of Radio and Television, and the famous Turkish actor, Bahadır Yenişehirlioğlu. This printing and distribution event occurred because it was part of a larger project called «Let the Quran Be My Gift», organized by TDV and Diyanet, and establishing Quranic Islamic study courses in Kazakhstan. They want to help promote Islamic teaching and improve the religious education of people in their countries outside Turkey. The project was started by TDV and Diyanet in 2015, and project to date has distributed over 1.3 million copies of the Holy Quran printed in 36 languages and dialects and distributed copies to 81 countries. The project is being used as a type of active cultural-religious diplomacy to connect spiritual ties and for promoting the interests of Islam. Furthermore, it fosters religious enlightenment and cultural integration on the global stage, reflecting Turkey's commitment to fostering religious and cultural cohesion internationally (Alakush & Yusupov, 2022).

Results and discussion

The roots of the Gülen movement in Kazakhstan date back to 1992, when the first Kazakh-Turkish

lyceums were founded through an intergovernmental agreement between the two countries. The socio-political context at the time was conducive to the spread of Gülenist influence: the Kazakh government actively endorsed Turkish educational initiatives, perceiving them as integral to an expanding framework of international cooperation. The establishment of these lyceums was interpreted as a gesture of goodwill from a «fraternal nation» with local authorities merely tasked with providing infrastructure. In parallel, the establishment of Kazakh-Turkish educational institutions served the strategic objectives of Turkey, which utilized them to further its cultural and ideological agendas. Notably, Turkish President Turgut Özal personally championed this initiative, fostering a close relationship with Gülen, and it was Özal who, in 1986, played a key role in securing his release, illustrating the deep political and ideological bonds between the two figures (Bilginçan, 2016).

The expansion of Fethullah Gülen's movement across Kazakhstan and other Central Asian states became particularly feasible within the context of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, which presented new opportunities for reinforcing its ideological stance on the global stage. In this rapidly shifting geopolitical environment, the Gülenists adeptly leveraged the transformed political landscape to forge educational and cultural ties with regions that had previously been entrenched within the Soviet political and socio-cultural framework. Notably, by the 1990s, the first Kazakh Turkish lyceums were established in Kazakhstan, which quickly became pivotal instruments for the dissemination of Gülen's philosophical and ideological tenets. Founded on an intergovernmental agreement between Turkey and Kazakhstan, these educational institutions functioned not only as centers of academic excellence but also as vehicles for embedding cultural and religious concepts closely aligned with Gülen's interpretation of Islam. The expansion of this educational network, coupled with the movement's growing influence across various sectors of Kazakhstani society, including the media, business, and civil society, played a crucial role in consolidating the presence of Gülenist ideals in Kazakhstan, despite the absence of official state backing in subsequent decades. This multifaceted approach facilitated the movement's deep integration into the socio-cultural fabric of the country (Temirbayev, Temirbayeva, Ryskiyeva & Kuranbek, 2024: 45-50).

Currently, the Gülen movement has consolidated substantial and enduring influence within Ka-

zakhstan's educational system, as demonstrated by the extensive network of Kazakh-Turkish lycees, universities, and colleges overseen by the KATEV Foundation. This development can be attributed to the establishment of a robust and efficient educational infrastructure, which encompasses 29 lycees and several higher educational institutions, including Suleyman Demirel University, the Economic College in Taraz, and the international «Nur-Orda» school. These institutions serve as critical nodes in the propagation of educational and ideological frameworks associated with the Gülen movement (Sultanmuratov, Kukeeva, Chukubaev, Baizakova, 2020). The KATEV Foundation, which serves as the operational base for this educational network, is wholly overseen by adherents of Gülen, a fact corroborated by numerous scholarly investigations, including those conducted by prominent experts such as B. Balci, whose research focuses on the activities of the movement in Central Asia (Balci, 2010: 151-153). It is crucial to emphasize that the influence of this movement extends beyond the educational sector, permeating other domains such as media and business, where Gülenist structures also maintain a presence. For example, in Kazakhstan, the Kazakhstan-Zaman newspaper continues to be published, and certain sectors of the Turkish business community are closely affiliated with Gülen's network. Additionally, the Kazakh-Turkish high schools have consistently achieved outstanding results, as evidenced by the substantial number of medals secured by students in National and International Olympiads, along with the high academic performance of graduates in the Unified National Testing. These achievements can be attributed not only to the superior quality of education but also to the highly selective admissions process, which places significant emphasis on identifying exceptionally talented and ambitious students. This approach is in direct alignment with Gülen's educational philosophy, which is centered around the cultivation of an elite «golden generation» of well-educated, devout Muslims who are prepared to take on leadership roles in both religious and secular spheres (Ivanov, 2014).

Fourthly, the importance of KATEV Foundation for the coherent professional development of Kazakh-Turkish high schools staff, which ensures the establishment of a sustainable system of continuous pedagogical education. This is done through the orchestration of specialized training courses, seminars and other didactic programs for developing the pedagogic skills of teaching staff. Due to various school perks, which include additional stipends far above

the national average income, instructors earn more income beyond their base salaries, giving them even more reasons to work hard. Financial support in this context isn't just a nice bonus – it's a strategic way to bring in talented educators and keep them around. But there's more to the story. Many of the teachers who follow Fethullah Gülen's philosophy don't just see their jobs as a paycheck. For them, it's about *hizmet*, or service. It's a mindset, a belief that teaching is part of a bigger mission. That's why they're often deeply committed, not just to academics, but to passing on a certain set of values. At schools supported by the KATEV Foundation, the classroom becomes a place where education and ideology go hand in hand. These schools don't just teach subjects – they shape beliefs, too.

KATEV's system has helped build schools that can truly compete – not just in terms of academics, but in how they're seen by society. Even though these schools are grounded in a particular philosophy, most people view them as neutral, independent places of learning. And that perception really matters. By keeping their ideological side low-key rather than in-your-face, these schools have been able to fit into the national education system without raising eyebrows. It's a careful balance – and so far, it seems to be working. The Kazakh-Turkish high schools have successfully established themselves as respected educational institutions in Kazakhstan, free from direct ties to Turkey, as emphasized by expert A. Izbairov. These schools have demonstrated their educational superiority by providing a high standard of education, producing graduates who are highly regarded in various sectors of public administration. In this context, their success in preparing students for competitive fields further solidifies their reputation and influence, while maintaining an outward appearance of independence, thus minimizing potential ideological resistance within the broader socio-political landscape of Kazakhstan (Balci, 2024: 2-7). Nevertheless, B. Balci argues that the ideological mission of the Gülen movement is primarily focused on the restoration of Islam in a region that was dominated by atheist rule for over 70 years. He draws a comparison between the Gülenists and the Jesuits, emphasizing that both groups strategically employ educational institutions as a conduit for propagating their respective ideological frameworks (Chedia, 2023).

In this context, it is essential to revisit the analysis provided by an academic from Istanbul, who explored the methods by which children are integrated into religious life within the framework of the edu-

cational process. The Gülen movement strategically identifies students with a predisposition toward deepening their understanding of Islam, enabling them to identify individuals most amenable to their ideological perspectives. Students in these lyceums find themselves in a tightly structured environment, where nearly every aspect of their daily life is carefully guided. But here's the interesting part: religious teachings don't usually come from teachers. Instead, that role falls to mentors known as "*abi*" – older, trusted guides who lead small groups and quietly introduce students to basic Islamic practices, like prayer. It's a low-profile approach that allows the movement's values to take root without making religion feel like a formal part of the school day. The result? A subtle, lasting influence that stretches beyond the classroom.

In Kazakhstan, particularly among traditional families, Islam holds a special place – not just as a faith, but as a cornerstone of cultural identity. This connection didn't happen overnight; it was shaped over generations through contact with the broader Muslim world, embedding Islamic principles deeply into Kazakh heritage. That's why the influence of the Gülen movement in Kazakh-Turkish lyceums raises important questions. While their interpretation of Islam aligns in many ways with established tradition, it also carries a specific ideological stamp – one shaped by Fethullah Gülen's teachings, which combine religious values with social and political ideals. The 2009 incident in Kostanay, where a disc with extremist content was discovered at one of these schools, served as a stark reminder: it's crucial to stay alert. When ideology quietly filters into education under the guise of faith, it becomes all the more important to critically examine what messages are truly being passed on to the next generation. Despite legal proceedings, the event did not lead to substantial consequences, pointing to the limitations of the legal system in effectively addressing the potential ideological threats posed by such movements (Kulik, 2016).

Thus, the interplay between intercultural and religious integration, as well as the divergent interpretations of Islamic teachings across different national contexts, fundamentally shapes the operational dynamics and influence of educational institutions such as the Kazakh-Turkish lyceums. The ideological conflicts embedded within the educational framework, alongside the potential for the dissemination of extremist content, necessitate vigilant oversight from both human rights organizations and academic institutions. An essential aspect

of this dynamic is the ability of these institutions to tailor their religious and cultural directives to the local sociocultural context, which consequently fosters a complex interaction between state-controlled and private educational initiatives. This integration highlights the tension between the local authorities' regulatory frameworks and the ideological imperatives of these institutions, thus revealing the intricate balance they must maintain in order to function within the broader educational landscape.

The activities of Gülenist schools in Kazakhstan, while ostensibly framed within a moderate and conducive approach to educational development, prompt critical inquiries regarding their broader societal implications. In particular, the pedagogical strategies at Kazakh-Turkish lyceums are oriented towards the cultivation of a highly skilled, competitive workforce, enhancing their educational prestige. However, it is crucial to note that Gülen's educational initiative was not limited to the recruitment of exceptionally gifted students; it also strategically sought to enroll children from elite social circles, such as the offspring of politicians and business leaders, thus ensuring a robust network of political and economic support. This dual focus on educational excellence and elite integration not only solidified the operational success of these institutions but also bolstered their strategic positioning within Kazakhstan's political and economic spheres. The alignment of educational and political agendas within Gülenist schools underscores their capacity to weave complex networks of influence, wherein reciprocal obligations and political capital become intertwined, thus securing the long-term sustainability and influence of these institutions within the national context (Sultanmuratov, 2018: 3-16).

The situation with elite students in the Kazakh-Turkish Lyceums highlights just how deeply educational programs can be tied to broader political and social goals. These schools aren't operating in a vacuum – they're part of a deliberate strategy that strengthens the Gülen movement's reach within Kazakhstan's societal framework. This influence is reinforced through a network of personal ties and social structures that help sustain its presence far beyond the classroom. Given all this, there's a clear need for thoughtful, in-depth analysis. We need to ask hard questions about how these institutions are shaping Kazakhstan's long-term trajectory – especially when it comes to social cohesion and the integrity of national sovereignty. The stakes, clearly, go well beyond education.

Kazakhstan's state policy vis-à-vis Gülenist

institutions now grapples with the complexities of navigating a dual challenge: maintaining strategic diplomatic ties with Turkey while simultaneously mitigating potential national security risks posed by the Gülen movement's influence. The nation's nuanced approach, balancing pragmatic cooperation with Turkey against the imperative to regulate the activities of Gülenist entities within its borders, reflects the broader geopolitical dynamics, cultural-ideological tensions, and international diplomatic considerations at play. The proposed transfer of the Kazakh-Turkish Lyceums to the Ministry of Education represents a significant policy shift with far-reaching consequences for both the educational system and internal political equilibrium, as such a move could dilute oversight over the ideological components embedded in the curriculum. Furthermore, this transition may lead to a degradation in educational quality, potentially fueling public discontent and exacerbating political instability. Thus, the future trajectory of the Kazakh-Turkish Lyceums is inextricably linked not only to the resolution of educational and ideological concerns but also to the broader strategic calculations regarding Kazakhstan's domestic and international economic interests (Baitenova & Zhetpisbai, 2021).

The issue of regulating the activities of the Kazakh-Turkish Lyceums in Kazakhstan encompasses not only aspects of educational policy but also addresses deeper concerns related to state governance, political stability, and international relations. This situation reflects a broader socio-political tension, which is driven by both external and internal challenges faced by countries that maintain diplomatic and cultural ties with Turkey, while simultaneously grappling with the political consequences of ideological influences. The consideration of potential solutions in the context of transferring the management of the Kazakh-Turkish Lyceums under state control raises significant questions regarding the delicate balance between national sovereignty, the autonomy of educational institutions, and the broader dynamics of international political alliances and support.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that Turkey's geopolitical strategy of religious policy represents a carefully constructed, multifaceted system encompassing not only external political interests but also significant cultural, religious, and educational ties with Central Asian countries, in-

cluding Kazakhstan. Through religious and educational initiatives, Turkey aims to create a favorable environment for spreading certain ideological and cultural values, which, in turn, strengthens its influence in the region. This influence is manifested in supporting and promoting Sunni Islamist ideology as well as developing cultural and educational projects that contribute to the formation of a new cultural identity aligned with Turkish models and Islamic philosophy in countries such as Kazakhstan. The specifics of Turkey's influence on Kazakhstan's socio-cultural space lie in the successful integration of educational initiatives, such as the Kazakh-Turkish lyceums, which have become important centers for training elite professionals. These institutions not only provide high-quality education but also actively instill religious and cultural values characteristic of the Gülen movement's philosophy. Gülen's strategy, aimed at creating a

«golden generation» of educated Muslims, has far-reaching consequences for shaping Kazakhstan's social and cultural structure.

Kazakhstan, striving to maintain strategic relations with Turkey, must effectively balance this external influence with the preservation of its political and cultural autonomy. Thus, the future interaction between Kazakhstan and Turkey within the framework of geopolitical religious strategy requires a systematic and reasoned approach to regulating educational and cultural initiatives, ensuring a balance between maintaining national identity and stability while considering external political interests. The issue of controlling ideological content and regulating religious and educational projects associated with Turkey remains one of the most important factors influencing Kazakhstan's social and political dynamics in a globalized world and in light of the rapidly changing geopolitical situation in the region.

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Registered on December 24, 2024

Accepted on June 14, 2025