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MUSLIM IDENTITY IN THE CITY OF TURKESTAN:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

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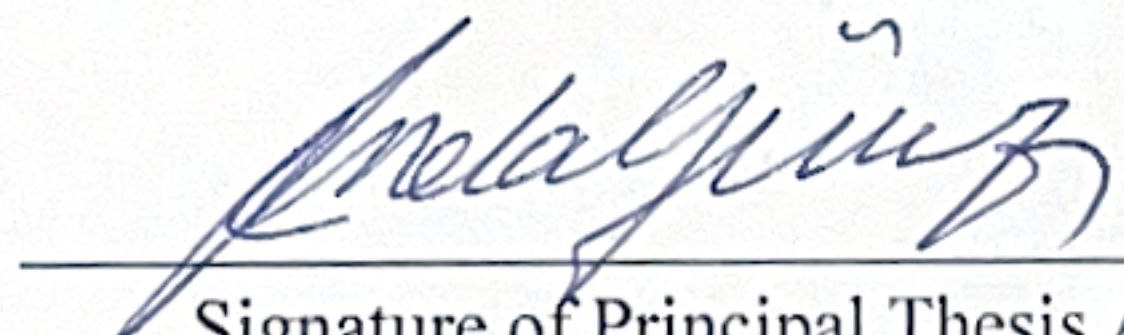
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Abstract

This thesis project is centered around Turkestan city in the south of Kazakhstan. Being the home to the Sufi leader Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, while at the same time an expanding modern city, the thesis explores how citizens in the city of Turkestan negotiate their identity between religious rules and values and secular systems. By looking at the population of people living in the city of Turkestan in Kazakhstan, there is an intersecting area between religious practices and secular environments. This research seeks to answer the question about how a pool of people affiliated with a specific educational institution in Turkestan perceive and negotiate their identity in a changing social and religious landscape. It focuses on conflicting feelings in individuals during the interactions between opposite genders stemming from religious rules, traditional values and secular norms of the society.

The existing research gap in scholarship does not cover the study on how the role of the school setting affects cross-gender interactions and how the construction of a Muslim identity functions in a secular country such as Kazakhstan. Earlier research on the topic of Muslim identity tend to focus on the political top-down point of view on religious identity in a secular country, though this research shows how individual people negotiate their identity between religion and secularism in a special setting, namely a closed community affiliated with a Turkish Kazakh high school. Hence, it is a bottom-up point of view on identity, values and points of conflict and discomfort for individuals with religious beliefs in a secular environment.

The methodology of the thesis is qualitative, and it includes semi-conducted, in-depth interviews. Based on the answers of the interviewees, this study argues that there is a strong religious identity and a moral compass within this group of people. However, many of the individuals experience a feeling of conflict with how the secular society and the religious rules are expecting them to behave. To analyse how individuals navigate their way through social

interactions, concepts such as *uyat* (shame), neighborhood pressure and cultural and Islamic practices is examined.

Finally, the study argues that religious values have a central role in many of the interviewees' life, though the secular work or school environment hinders them in pursuing a religious oriented life. The intersection between religious values and rules that the interviewees want to follow may cause a conflict with the society around them, creating a feeling of discomfort, guilt or split opinions on how to behave in their interactions with opposite genders.

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I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my advisors for support, feedback and patience, and for letting me discover this world of religion, secularism, and the individuals in it. I sincerely appreciate my external adviser for giving me a new way to see my thesis as not just a research project – but as a study of individual human beings.

I could not have completed this thesis without my mom, my brother and my twin sisters in Norway who sat through numerous phone calls, always encouraged me and made me believe that I could finalise the project. It is because of them that I can proudly say that I am the first from my family to receive a master's degree in Kazakhstan, and the first Norwegian student to graduate from Nazarbayev University. I am truly grateful for my friend and roommate Serikzhan for giving me endless support throughout this challenging, yet exciting, period of writing the thesis.

Last, but not least, I must share my appreciation for the Nazarbayev University community of friends and professors that I have been lucky to have around me for the past two years. Prior to my arrival in Kazakhstan, I could not have imagined the magnitude of personal stories that I would hear at the university. I have learnt so much from every one of you who sat down with me and told me about your experiences and opinions. It has meant the world to me to gain an insight into your culture and to feel the warmth of the Kazakh hospitality. It is because of you that I feel like I belong here.

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Amalie Moen Eidet, May 12, 2026

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Introduction

From the bottom-up point of view this thesis shows how individuals are navigating through a secular system while attempting to follow religious values that they adopt from their families and social environments, specifically the Kazakh high school which was started as an initiative from a Turkish religious network. This is a thesis that explores how individual people negotiate their social identity and whether there is a tension within the individuals themselves. According to expectations of their families, religion, their societies as well as the high school under study, who are the individuals supposed to be?

Research Problem, Relevance and Questions

The aim of the thesis is to be able to answer the question “how do people in the city of Turkestan negotiate their identity between Islamic rules and secular norms on the topic of interactions between opposite genders”.

The concept about religion and religious beliefs has changed. Stark writes that the world has come more religious than ever, but people are not necessarily practicing it even though they are identifying themselves as religious people. It appears as a “feeling” according to Stark, not a practicing lifestyle (Stark, 2015). Religious practices are not only practices inside the religious institutions, but they could be the practices that individuals carry with them in secular environments such as by not mingling with the opposite gender. Hence, they can practice their religion outside the religious institution itself as consciously constructed social rules. In the high school, which was started as an initiative from a Turkish network, some consciously constructed social rules are those of how they are expected to interact – or not interact – with the opposite gender.

I am also thinking that religious identity does not mean a belief or spiritual feeling of an individual, but also a social identity marker which defines them in the society they live in. Khalid writes that after the dissolution of the USSR, being Muslim in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan became an important identity marker for the individuals against the Russians living in their territory (Khalid, 2007, p. 119). Thus, Islam became a part of their national identity dividing it into “us versus them”.

I would argue that revival of religion in a country happens in many countries where the colonized people want to untie themselves from the colonizers culture, ideologies and religious views. Islam functioned as an opposition to the Soviet atheist regime during the Soviet period. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, in the case of Kazakhstan there was – among other religions – an apparent visibility of Islam.

The conflicting part about Kazakhstan is that the state is secular, but the people identify themselves as religious. And as seen in the literature review, the state tries to uphold a Muslim identified state, while limiting the activities of the religion in the country. And this juxtaposition, this contradiction, has an impact on how people act on an individual level. The contradictory value of the state creates individuals with a contradictory, conflicting identity.

In 1991, when Kazakhstan became an independent country, the country itself was secular. The government was secular, meaning that it was supposed to allow all religions to coexist with the country without favorizing any of them. In Kazakhstan there are many different religious and ethnic group that live side by side. Among this is the dominant group of Muslims. Hence, it indicates that Islamic values, viewpoints, norms and social behaviors have had and continues to have an imprint on Kazakhs.

The role of religion is however, changing in Kazakhstan. In the new constitution which was voted for in March 2026, in article 7.1 it says that “Религия отделена от государства”

(“Religion is separate from the state”) (Kazakhstan’s Constitutional Commission, 2026). In Kazakhstan, religion and the nation itself is separate. Unofficially, on an individual level, the line between religion and society is not necessarily clear.

This thesis centers around the intersection between the secular and Muslim values, norms and rules in individuals’ behaviours. How does the intersection between Islam and secularism in Kazakhstan impact people? What are their social behaviors in a specific high school setting in Turkestan? How do they view their own identity? Which personal relationships are impacting different individuals the most? In specific, the research is not trying to capture the whole of Kazakhstan, but rather a specific group of people in the city of Turkestan in the south of Kazakhstan.

Background: Turkestan as a Religious and Social Space

The personal interest in the city of Turkestan as a research topic came to the researcher after having spent time there in March 2025. Turkestan city has a religious significance for Kazakhstan and studying how religion merges with the secular Kazakhstan in this city is important. Populated by a dense group of Uzbeks, and Kazakhs, the city is a significant mark of the history of Kazakh identity. Arrival and withdrawal of Russian settlers in the city proves that it was a foreign soil to the Russians as the population was heavily Muslim. Finally, the city which is the home of the Mausoleum after Turkic poet and Sufi mystic Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, still has a significance in Kazakhstan and in the entire Turkic world as a pilgrimage site.

Turkestan: Historical and Symbolic Meanings

The name Turkestan covers several different areas, not only the city in today’s Kazakhstan. According to Hasan Ali Karasar, Turkestan has historically been used to describe four areas. It was Russian Turkestan in the west, Chinese Turkestan in the east, Afghan Turkestan in the

south and the Greater (Uluğ) Turkestan (Karasar, 2002, p. 3). Russian Turkestan is the region which today is where the city of Turkestan is located.

Before the 16th century, Turkestan was a village that was called Yasi (“Yasī”) (Privratsky, 1998, p. 4), where the Turkic Sufi leader Khoja Ahmed Yasawi was given his name. Yasawi was buried in a tomb in the Mausoleum by the same name in modern day’s city of Turkestan. The previous name of Turkestan city, “Yasī” has the suffix “ī” which is an Arabic indicator for origin. Hence the name “Yasī” means that it is the hometown or the “origin” of the Muslim saint Khoja Ahmed Yasawi (Privratsky, 1998, p. 4).

After the sixteenth century, the city of Yasi was renamed to “Turkestan”. Privratsky writes that this was because “Turk” itself means “nomad” (Privratsky, 1998, p. 93). Further he writes that the word “nomad” is associated with Kazakhs, and he clarifies that “it is not that Turkistan has always belonged to Kazaks – as long as they have been Kazakhs, but the Kazaks – has always belonged to Turkistan” (Privratsky, 1998, p. 93). He is further saying that it is possible that Kazakhs were the reason why Yasi was renamed to Turkestan. It marked the transition to a period where the town was no longer just the hometown of Yasawi, but the town of nomads – Kazakhs.

Demographic and Social Composition of the City

Renaming the city in the sixteenth century shows that Kazakhs had lived in the town for many centuries already, but as Privratsky writes – so has the Uzbeks. The fact that these ethnic groups of Uzbeks and Kazakhs have lived together in one town for many centuries questions how much influence the different groups had on each other’s traditions, religious views and values.

The region has since prior to the Soviet Union been populated densely by indigenous groups of people, among them Kazakhs and Uzbeks. Turkestan was a melting pot of different villages. In each village people of different ethnic backgrounds were living. Still today there

are specific areas where ethnic Uzbeks and ethnic Kazakhs are living, while other areas are mixed of both Kazakhs and Uzbeks.

In 1897, Turkestan had 11,253 inhabitants (Privratsky, 1998, p. 8). Up until the beginning of the Soviet Union, Turkestan was a city that had a minority of Kazakhs (Privratsky, 1998, p. 8). 12 percents, as in 1,415 of the inhabitants were Kazakhs, (Privratsky, 1998, p. 8) and most of the population were Uzbeks (Privratsky, 1998, p. 8). The demographic of Turkestan is illustrating the changing lifestyle for Kazakhs living in Kazakhstan in the late 1800s and early 1900s. It was the time prior to the collectivization of Central Asia and the forced sedentarization of Kazakh nomads.

The reason why demographics in Kazakhstan in the late 1800s and early 1900s is important, is that religion played a different role among the people of different ethnic groups. In the beginning of the 1900s, Uzbeks were sedentary people while Kazakhs were nomads (Kesici, 2017, p. 1136). Since the Kazakhs were nomadic people, they experienced a less significant connection with Islam than the Uzbeks, according to Kesici (Kesici, 2017, p. 1136). This can be explained because of Uzbekistan's closer connection to their Persian and Arabic neighbours (Kesici, 2017, p. 1136). Because the Kazakh nomads moved their home every season, their connection to the Persian and Arabic Islam was presumably weaker than that of Uzbeks. The argument here can be that Kazakhs that were living in Turkestan in the late 1800s and early 1900s were less religious than the ethnic Uzbeks that they were living with.

The name "Turkestan" is also a wider term for "the country of Turks" (Karasar, 2002, p. v). The term comes from pan-Turkism where the idea was to unite "the scattered people sharing a common or closely related culture, history, language and religion" (Hyman, 1997, p. 339). To understand pan-Turkism, we need to go back to the 19th century when pan-Turkism developed as an ideology. It appeared as a response to the Russian expansion in the 1880s

(Shichor, 2018, p. 301), and it was a political movement that had the aim of uniting Turkic speaking people of Turkic culture and ethnic origin (Shichor, 2018, p. 301). The target group of the movement was mainly Muslims, meaning that they wanted to unite Muslims from different Turkic countries. Turkestan was therefore a name used to describe a bigger area of people where Turkic languages were spoken.

The larger region of Turkestan had a specific significance in Russian colonisation history as it appeared to be one of the more different regions of their colonised areas. Turkestan were one of two regions where the indigenous people were the majority of the population, and the Russians were the minority (Morrison, 2015, pp. 389–390). During the Soviet Union, the demographic of Turkestan changed due to changed lifestyles for Kazakhs. The Russian settlers found themselves to be quite different from the indigenous population because of their background, language and culture (Morrison, 2015, pp. 389–390). According to Alexander Morrison, the Russian settlers considered the most populated areas of Turkestan region to be the most Islamic and therefore the “most dangerous” (Morrison, 2015, p. 394). This could be explained by the fact that Russians were predominately Orthodox Christians. Perhaps it would be a challenge for the Russians to integrate into their community, or to convert a population that was mainly Muslim.

Another fact to be mentioned is that the Russian settlers did not want to settle in Turkestan primarily. Half of the settlers had tried to settle in European Russia, and the remaining in Siberia and other places before they came to the south region of Turkestan (Morrison, 2015, p. 396). Hence, the geographical region of Turkestan covered several countries, while also being the name of the city in the south of Kazakhstan, which is the scope for this thesis.

Over the span of a hundred years the demographic of the city has changed considerably. The city of Turkestan has grown and increased its population 20 times since the end of the 1800s, thereby confirming the statement that the south region of the country is the most densely populated region in Kazakhstan. At the end of the 1990s when Privratsky wrote his dissertation on Turkestan city and collective memory, he finds that the number of Kazakhs that were living in the region exceeded the number of Uzbeks living there.

In 1998, Privratsky writes that of those 85,000 people that were living in Turkestan, 90 percent of the population was either Kazakh or Uzbek, and the minority of the population were ethnic groups like Tatars, Turks and Russians (Privratsky, 1998, p. 72). Further Privratsky writes that Kazakhs were of a higher number than Uzbeks in Turkestan. The reason why the population of Kazakhs increased, was that they came to Turkestan as factory workers to work in the new industrial Turkestan (Privratsky, 1998, p. 73).

In 2019 Kazakhstan had 19,2 million inhabitants (Worldometer, 2026). The south region had a total of 2.8 million inhabitants, and therefore it made up more than one-sixth of the population of Kazakhstan (Rahimi & Eshaghi, 2019, p. 150). Turkestan city itself had in 2023 a total of 224,113 inhabitants, according to the UN (UN data, 2025).

Religious Heritage and Collective Memory

I will go into the religious history of Turkestan, the construction of the Mausoleum after Khoja Ahmed Yasawi and its meaning for Islam in Turkestan. Further I will introduce the role of Timurid Empire one the Islamization of Central Asia, and how the centuries of construction of Timurid architecture shaped a transition from Tengrism to Islam. The impact of institutional Islam under the Soviet Union era will be described in this literature review as well. This section will also provide a discussion about which change religious belief systems underwent during the Soviet Union and how the collapse of the Soviet Union created a more open religious

national identity for Kazakhs. Having this introduction to this section in the literature review in mind, we can start by digging into the meaning of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi for Turkestan city and for Kazakhstan.

Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi

On a guided group tour around the Mausoleum in the spring of 2025, we were told about the details of the Timurid architecture of the Mausoleum centralised in Turkestan. The building is painted with blue and purple strokes. The blue and purple lines on the outside walls are not simply patterns, but Arabic writings. To our surprise, the writings on the wall were all different depending on where you were looking. Starting from the south-west side, our local guide used a laser when he read out the words on the wall: “Allah Muhammed”. Some of the writings were written horizontally, but the main writing on the wall were written in circular squares. The pattern was consistent, and the Islamic message on the wall was clear. We walked to the north-east side of the Mausoleum where we could read on the wall “subhanallah walhamdulillah”. In Arabic “subhanallah” means “Glory to Allah” and “walhamdulillah” means “Praise be to Allah”. (See appendix #1-3 for photos of the walls of the Mausoleum.)

The name of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi is written differently in literature. Privratsky emphasises how locals used the name as “Qul Qoja Ahmet Yasawi”, which means “servant of God. He also wrote that Ahmet, carrying the name the name “Qoja”, is considered a descendant of the Arabs and a man of Yasi (Privratsky, 1998, p. 4). According to Malikov, Khoja Ahmed Yasawi is Kazakhstan’s most popular saint (Rahimi & Eshaghi, 2019, p. 153). Based on the previous name for the city, Yasi, and the place name’s connection Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, we can trace an Islamic history in the city of Turkestan (Rahimi & Eshaghi, 2019, p. 164).

The Mausoleum after Khoja Ahmed Yasawi in the city of Turkestan is the most notable Islamic monument in Kazakhstan. Yasawi himself lived from 1093 to 1166, and was buried in a tomb which later was made into a mausoleum (Mannopov et al., 2025, p. 1). The Mausoleum is also the largest religious monument in the country, according to Fariza Bekenova et al (Bekenova et al., 2025, p. 3). One hour drive from Turkestan is also the Mausoleum after Arystan-Bab, who was the spiritual mentor of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi. The mausoleum after Arystan-Bab was built before the Mausoleum after Ahmed Yasawi, in the 12th century (Bekenova et al., 2025, p. 5).

It is known that two centuries after Yasawi's death, he was buried in a Mausoleum that was named after himself as a great Sufi spiritual leader. A key contributor to building of the Mausoleum after him was Amir Timur (Tamerlane). He was the one who sent orders in the 1390s for the Mausoleum after Khoja Ahmed Yasawi to be built. Tamerlane's intention behind building the Mausoleum was to honor Sufi saints, among them Yasawi (Privratsky, 1998, p. 68). The building of the Mausoleum was also a part of the bigger process of Islamizing Central Asia.

Timur was a "semi-nomadic conqueror", (Paskaleva, 2015, p. 419) as in someone who moved around seasonally and conquered land. He had a vast empire at the beginning of the 15th century which stretched from India in the East to Türkiye in the West (Paskaleva, 2015, p. 419). Timur was the Turkic sultan who used Sufi networks to make connections between Turkic people of Central Asia with the Ottoman empire. His empire was referred to as the Timurid Empire, and the architectural monuments that were raised on his orders are known as monuments of Timurid architecture (Paskaleva, 2015, p. 419).

The Mausoleum after Khoja Ahmed Yasawi is of the same architecture as the three madrasas (religious schools) that are in Registan, which was the centre of Samarkand in

Uzbekistan during the Timurid Empire (Roshdy, 2024, p. 198). (See appendix #4 for the Registan madrasas in Samarkand). The Mausoleum and the Madrasas functions as what Roshdy refers to as “model[s] of the architectural styles of Madrasas in Central Asia” (Roshdy, 2024, p. 198).

The Mausoleum after Khoja Ahmed Yasawi is considered the largest brick dome of Central Asia (Privratsky, 1998, p. 68). And the buildings that are of Timurid architecture are worldwide known as “masterpieces of Islamic architecture” (Paskaleva, 2015, p. 419). According to Privratsky, Tamerlane’s purpose of building the Mausoleum was to rule the Kazakh nomads through Islam and Sufism (Privratsky, 1998, p. 69). What Privratsky means here is related to Muslim identity. His argument is that Tamerlane built the Mausoleum, or “the Sufi monument” as he calls it, to endure the Muslim identity of Kazakhs (Privratsky, 1998, p. 96).

The Mausoleum did not only provide a sacred place for the tomb of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi to be located, but it marked a bigger historical shift. It marked a transition in spirituality and religious views in Kazakhstan and other Turkic countries, according to Bekenova et al (Bekenova et al., 2025, p. 4).

From the 6th to the 8th centuries, in the Ancient Turkic period, Turkic people believed in Tengrism and Shamanism, and from the 9th century Turkic people transitioned to Islam. These beliefs were categorised as traditional beliefs, with ancestor worship and deep respect for nature and spirits (Bekenova et al., 2025, p. 4). Rico Isaacs write that Tengrism can be looked upon as more than a religion, but the relationship that Turkic people had with their land. Isaacs refers to Tengrism as a “deep rooted philosophy” (Isaacs, 2021, p. 2), one that portrays the lifestyle that the nomads of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan had. In Rico’s words, Tengrism is a belief system and framework that allows its believers to connect with nature (Isaacs, 2021, p.

6). He ends the chapter on Tengrism by saying that Tengrism is “not a religious creed as such, nor the basis of an exclusive identity, but rather a psychogeographical worldview” (Isaacs, 2021, p. 6).

The 9th century marked, as mentioned above, the transition to Islam. The period from 9th to the 12th century is referred to as Early Islamization. Bekenova et al. found that Islam was gradually spread through cultural interactions and trade (Bekenova et al., 2025, p. 5). One of two key figures in this period was Khoja Ahmed Yasawi. Further Bekenova et al. write that the transition to Islam contributed to increased literacy in Turkic countries. What they refer to here specifically was the establishment of religious schools (madrasas) (Bekenova et al., 2025, p. 5).

Pilgrimage to the Mausoleum

In the 1900s, during the Soviet Union, the Mausoleum after Yasawi gave path for a new form of pilgrimage for Muslims. Believers of Islam started to undertake their journey to the Mausoleum after Yasawi, and the Mausoleum became recognised as the “second Mecca” (ekinshi Mecce)” (Privratsky, 1998, p. 4). I will come back to the new form of pilgrimage later in this chapter.

Secondly, Yasawi is considered an important figure because he symbolises the bond between Turkic people and their spiritual and religious background. In the late 2020s, the former president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, considered Yasawi to be “the spiritual founder of the Turkic people” (Rahimi & Eshaghi, 2019, p. 164). Hence, we can understand Nazarbayev’s statement about Khoja Ahmed Yasawi being the spiritual founder of Turkic people, as Yasawi being the bridge between people who are Turkic. By this statement, he must have meant that Yasawi is the common ancestor in terms spirituality for Turkic people, and that Yasawi and Sufism is the connection between Turkic people.

Religion has had not only a spiritual function for Turkic people, according to Fariza Bekenova et al. They write that religion has also functioned as a socio-political tool to merge ethnic groups together (Bekenova et al., 2025, p. 2). In other words, religion has connected people of the same ethnic group, meaning that it has created some kind of national identity.

Turkestan is, as indicated in this chapter, of significance because of its holy sites. To illustrate the significance of the city, I will use an example from Azim Malikov's work. He writes that "three pilgrimages to Turkistan are equivalent to one Hajj to Mecca." The author is also stating that "The Turkistan region of Kazakhstan has always been the religious center of the country, where most of its holy sites are based" (Rahimi & Eshaghi, 2019, p. 150).

In Privratsky's encounters with pilgrims around the Mausoleum after Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, he writes that he got the impression that Kazakh Muslims or Kazakh pilgrims identified themselves with Yasawi. "[The Mausoleum of] Ahmet Yasawi is the Kazaks' [and] the Muslims' place-of-saints", one Kazakh pilgrim told him (Privratsky, 1998, p. 96). Further he said, "If you have not seen Turkistan, it is shameful to call yourself a Kazak" (Privratsky, 1998, p. 96).

Privratsky connects these statements that the pilgrim tells him with the concept of collective memory. It means that this Kazakh pilgrim, and perhaps many more Kazakh Muslims, had a collective memory of Kazakhs being descendants, or connected to Ahmed Yasawi. The pilgrim also said that their identity as Kazakhs being connected to Yasawi meant that they perceived their ethnicity as being Muslims.

Soviet Secularism and the Transformation of Religious Practice

I will dedicate the next section to what scholars say about the role of religion, and specifically the role of Islam in Central Asia during the period of the Soviet Union. Sholpan Zhandossova, Natalya Seitakhmetova and Marhabbat Nurov are making the argument that

Kazakhstan had an Islamic revival despite having been suppressed during the Soviet Union (Zhandossova et al., 2025). Edward C. Holland and Matthew Derrick also write that Islam, and other religions, did not undergo complete suppression (Holland & Derrick, 2016). Religious groups were oppressed, but some groups were more targeted than others.

Secularization in the Soviet Union was unlike any other experiment. The goal was to eradicate religion and God completely and replace any belief with loyalty to the Soviet state (Holland & Derrick, 2016, p. 75). Mosques and other religious institutions were closed, but, according to Holland and Derrick the personal belief among people was not removed (Holland & Derrick, 2016, p. 75).

Pilgrimage to Mecca is something that practicing Muslims are expected to, but during the Soviet Union this practice changed. Many mosques and shrines were destroyed. Pilgrimage to Mecca [Hajj] was restricted which led to a new function for the existing shrines. These shrines served as both museums and destinations for pilgrimage in Kazakhstan. (Rahimi & Eshaghi, 2019, p. 154)

Rahimi and Eshaghi write that shrines filled a “spiritual vacuum” that was left because of Soviet secularisation in Central Asia (Rahimi & Eshaghi, 2019, p. 166). Hence, I would like to argue that shrines, such as the Mausoleum after Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, gained significant importance for pilgrims and Muslims in Central Asia during the Soviet Union. Yet there were differences in how the Soviet government treated the different religious groups. Orthodox institutions were persecuted, while Islamic institutions were not as clearly targeted from the beginning of the Soviet Union.

Holland and Derrick categorize the relationship that Communism and Islam had as “ambiguous” (Holland & Derrick, 2016, p. 81). Firstly, in Central Asia, they closed mosques and any educational institutions affiliated with Islam. However, “Soviet Muslims” created a

separate identity from being communists. They also based their identity on being Muslim, because they were both of their own religious group while at the same time communist members. This merged religious identity was accepted during the Soviet Union, according to Holland and Derrick (Holland & Derrick, 2016, p. 81). The relationship between Communism and Islam was ambiguous because even though Islam was suppressed by institutions being closed down, Muslims were allowed to have the dual identity as “Soviet Muslims” – both religious and a part of the atheist Soviet.

Post-Soviet Religious Revivalism

If we can state that there was an Islamic revival after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and that the practice of Islam increased, the people growing up in the Soviet Union and the people that grew up in the post-Soviet Kazakhstan, will have different ways of practicing Islam. However, the way that inhabitants of Turkestan city have practiced religion might have impacted by individuals as much as on a macro-level.

When discussing Islam’s role in Kazakhstan and the revival of Islam, an important theory to bring up is the collective behaviour theory (Malik, 2019, p. 355). Malik writes that collective behaviour theory is that societies need a sense of equilibrium, and any factor that causes imbalance has consequences (Malik, 2019, p. 356). In order to restore balance in the society, the society and its individuals will naturally do a collective action and search for a different way to restore the collective behaviour. I understand ‘collective behaviour’ as a bond between individuals in a society. It is the idea of something that is connecting them and that defines them as one unit and one society.

An example of a factor that causes imbalance in a society, could be that of the collapse of the Soviet Union. If we are to state that Central Asian countries underwent ideological uncertainty because of the collapse of the Soviet Union, we should turn to the collective behaviour theory to explain what happened next. An ideological vacuum was left behind

because the states were no longer supposed to be communist. The masses of people looked for a different ideological system, where Islam became a popular identity (Malik, 2019, p. 356). Even though Kazakhstan was supposed to be a secular state, the authorities recognized that they could not create a national identity without including the deep-rooted Islamic values and traditions.

Another concept I would like to use to explain how the collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in an Islamic revival, is “collective memory”. The ethnographer Bruce G. Privratsky, who did his dissertation on Turkestan city from 1992 to 1998, was interested in how the collective memory of ethnicity and religion in Kazakhstan is mediated through Islamic values and views. In his research he is looking at how collective memory functions as a framework to understand how people recover their religious identity (Privratsky, 1998, p. 415). He describes the collective memory as “a sociopsychological process that evokes a cultural present from its historical sources, and vice versa.”(Privratsky, 1998, p. 43) When Privratsky is using the term “collective memory”, he is referring to how people idealize the past and continue to live by those beliefs in the future. Individual people have social memories, or collective memories, that are provided by the environment or community that they have around them. A person’s social memory is affected by how the people around them recall their religious beliefs and where they come from (Privratsky, 1998, p. 44).

Drawing from Privratsky’s work, collective memory functions as a unification of people through the ideological values and beliefs that are presumably connected to their ethnicity. If we are to use “collective memory” as a framework to understand Muslim identity in Turkestan, we should assume that Kazakhs living in Turkestan had a set of religious views and values that existed prior to Kazakhstan’s inclusion into the Soviet Union. As several generations have grown up in the Soviet Union, while two or almost three generations have lived in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, data from people living in Turkestan should show that different mentalities exist.

To connect the concepts that we have just been introduced to, which are those of collective memory and collective behaviour theory, we can try to interpret them as related. The collective memory theory suggests that people within a community connect with each other and search for values, viewpoints and look towards rules and norms that existed for them as group of people before. Similarly, the collective behaviour theory suggests that people will, as one unit, look for a different ideology. These concepts are related as they suggest that in a community or group of people, there is a common feeling of unity, and this group will move together. It implies that there is a common mentality among people inside a community, and any sort of unbalance is looked upon as a threat towards the community.

According to the scholars listed above, the collapse of the Soviet Union caused an imbalance or an identity crisis among Kazakhs. They needed to find a common ground, or a common ideology among themselves. Hence, the argument here is that Kazakhs moved as a collective group towards the collective memory of being Muslims. As discussed above by Holland and Derrick, Islam did not disappear completely during the Soviet Union. It changed its form, and that can be seen in how the Mausoleum after Khoja Ahmed Yassawi became important for pilgrimage, but it did not mean that Islam disappeared completely. The reason why I am bringing up the Islamic Revival in Kazakhstan is that it is important to understand the role of Islam in Turkestan. By seeing how Islam has endured empires, we can better understand how the people's relationship to the religion has changed or remained the same as the relationship that people who were living in the Soviet Union had with Islam.

Revisiting the concept of Islamic revival, I would like to understand how this works at an individual level. A revival of Islam indicates, as I have written before, that the interest in religion has increased from earlier. It is a return to values and viewpoints of a religion that existed in a community of people before. The argument that Rahimi and Eshaghi make when they write that shrines filled a "spiritual vacuum" that was left behind after the Soviet Union,

implies that a common identity of being Muslim existed before, and it was stronger prior to the Soviet Union. The idea that a community of people want to return to a set of religious values and viewpoints, is planted in what Bruce G. Privratsky describes as “collective memory”.

Institutions, Turkish Influence and Religious Socialization

Up until now I have argued that the Islamic revival that happened in Kazakhstan was caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union, and this is based on the argument that Kazakh people formed a unity where they sought for a common ideology. This was presumably the religion of Islam. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union is not the main explanation for the return to religion in Kazakhstan. This section will be about Kazakh Turkish relations, and specifically about the Turkish institutions that were established in Turkestan due to this cooperation. The concept of “Turkish soft power” will be introduced, and educational institutions will be the focus to explain how this soft power functioned. In this section, the topic of Islam will not be left behind as it lays the fundament for the reasons as to why many religious and non-religious institutions were opened.

“Turkish soft power” became active in the 1990s in Central Asia. Yurtbilir argues that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the newly achieved independence of the Central Asian states functioned as a turning point or an entry point for Turkish Foreign Policy (TFP) to Kazakhstan (Yurtbilir, 2023, p. 136). Hence, when I wrote that the collapse of the Soviet Union was not the main reason for the Islamic revival, perhaps Turkish soft power in Central Asian countries like Kazakhstan, came to be as a result of the end of the union.

Firstly, I will present the definition that Yurtbilir uses to define what a soft power is. A soft power is when resources such as culture, institutions and ideology are used to influence people and thereby hold power over them (Yurtbilir, 2023, p. 136). It is the opposite of a hard power, as there are no military forces used to take control over an area. Therefore, Turkish soft

power in Central Asia is how the Turkish government and separate, independent institutions have influenced Central Asian countries by promoting Turkish culture, institutions and religion.

To elaborate on this, I will go back to 1924 when The Presidency of Religious Affairs “Diyamet” was established in Türkiye. The purpose in Diyanet was to limit religious activity outside the control of the state (Yurtbilir, 2023, p. 137). They spread a version of Islam that would be proper for a secular state in different Central Asian states (Yurtbilir, 2023, p. 137). According to Yurtbilir, this version of Islam presented by Diyanet was something that was of interest to the newly independent Central Asian countries and they favored this over Islam presented from the Middle-East. A visible aspect of the Turkish soft power in the city of Turkestan is the establishment of the Khoja Ahmed Yasawi mosque, built on the initiative of Diyanet (Türkiye Diyanet Foundation, 2026).

Turkish Educational Institutions and Moral Formation

One field that was of particular interest for Turkish soft power in Kazakhstan was education. Dinmukhammed Ametbek and Aidarbek Amirbek write that education occurred to be the highest priority for the new cooperation between Kazakhstan and Türkiye (Ametbek & Amirbek, 2014, p. 191). According to the scholars, the cooperation of Turkish educational institutions in Kazakhstan were beneficial for both parts: Kazakhstan needed to modernize their educational system, and Turkish foreign policy sought to build close relationships with the other Turkic countries through helping them to become independent and to integrate into the international system of education (Ametbek & Amirbek, 2014, p. 191).

Another reason for Türkiye to invest in education in Kazakhstan, according to Ametbek and Amirbek, was that they wanted to help Kazakhstan out of an “identity crisis” (Ametbek & Amirbek, 2014, p. 191). The argument here is that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan found itself in a crisis about who they were as a country and as people. Having been part of Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan needed to come back to their

roots as a nation. And this was fulfilled, again according to Ametbek and Amirbek, by retracing back to Kazakhstan's identity which was firstly a Turkic and Islamic identity (Ametbek & Amirbek, 2014, pp. 191–192).

Among the many educational opportunities that Türkiye created for students from Turkic countries, was the option to study in Türkiye. They launched the program 'Great student project', and this started in the academic year of 1992-1993 (Ametbek & Amirbek, 2014, p. 192). Again, the purpose of educating students from Turkic countries, such as Kazakhstan, was to build a closer relationship between Türkiye and other Turkic countries.

The education of students from other Turkic countries in Türkiye can be found in the data for this thesis project. One of my interviewees were one of the students who studied in Türkiye for their bachelor's degree. They were of the first cohort that left Kazakhstan in 1992 to study abroad. The interviewee referred to it as a possibility for them to escape a Kazakhstan that was newly independent and chaotic at the time. They received a bachelor's degree there and returned to Kazakhstan later. Up until today he still speaks Turkish, and he says that he gets use of Turkish in Turkestan often, indicating that there are a lot of Turkish people who come to visit Turkestan for pilgrimage, for touristic reasons or that they live there permanently.

1992 also saw the opening of Ahmet Yesevi University in Turkistan city (Yurtbilir, 2023, p. 145). In 2014, when Ametbek and Amirbek wrote about Turkish influence on education in Kazakhstan, Ahmet Yesevi University in Turkistan city had 16,000 students. Most of the students were local students from Kazakhstan, one-fourth of the students were Turkish and less than five percent of the students were from other Turkic speaking countries (Ametbek & Amirbek, 2014, p. 193).

The fact that they spoke mainly Kazakh in Turkestan city was an important factor for the establishment of Ahmet Yesevi University there. As Turkish and Kazakh are both Turkic

languages, and hence Ametbek and Amirbek write that it made it easier for Türkiye to implement education instructed in the Turkish language (Ametbek & Amirbek, 2014, p. 193).

Ametbek and Amirbek write that the university could have been placed in a more intellectual centers like Almaty or Astana (Shelekpavev, 2020, p. 505). However, in 1992 Almaty was still the capital of Kazakhstan, and Astana, which was called Akmola in 1992 (Shelekpavev, 2020, p. 505). Nazarbayev proposed to move the capital from Almaty to Astana first time in 1994, but Astana only received capital-status six years later, in 1998 (Shelekpavev, 2020, p. 505). Astana (then called Akmolinsk) consisted of industrial and residential areas in the 1950s, and by 1987 the riverside areas around Yesil saw the building of summer houses. The south part of the city was not yet built when the proposal to make Astana the new capital in 1994. Shelekpavev writes that Astana was “drastically unprepared for the change [to become the new capital]”. The first plans for the new, modern city which were made by Japanese architects, were made in 1998. (Shelekpavev, 2020, p. 505) Hence, Ametbek and Amirbek’s description of Astana as a “intellectual center” in 1992 would be an inaccurate description as it was still under development and not yet the capital of the city.

I will continue with explaining why Türkiye opened Ahmet Yesevi University in Turkistan city in 1992. As Ametbek and Amirbek writes, Turkestan was considered a “backward town” during the years of the Soviet Union (Ametbek & Amirbek, 2014, p. 193). There were two major reasons as to why Kazakhstan was interested in opening the university there: the names ‘Turkistan’ and ‘Ahmed Yesevi’ were symbolic for Kazakhs, and the country thought that the establishment of a university there would evoke interest and investments in the city in the coming years (Ametbek & Amirbek, 2014, p. 193). The second reason was that in the early 1990s, the general tendency was that the bigger cities were Russian culture dominated, while the rural areas were preoccupied with Kazakh culture, according to Ametbek and Amirbek (Ametbek & Amirbek, 2014, p. 193). Türkiye appoints professors to teach

temporarily at Yasawi University. Those professors who have conservative nationalist views interacted with Uzbeks in the city when they arrived first because of common Islamic traits.

Among other educational institutions that were established by Turkish institutions and movements were a series of Kazakh Turkish high schools. The schools were a part of a bigger non-governmental movement called the Gülen Movement, established by the Muslim scholar and preacher Fethullah Gülen. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Gülen opened schools in Central Asia and across the world. Gülen was, according to Bayram Balci, “deeply influenced” by the ideas of Said Nursi, a scholar of Islam. Said was invested in demonstrating that “Islam belonged to the present and the future just as much as science and modernity did”, according to Bayram Balci (Balci, 2003, p. 152).

Gülen’s movement was the biggest Islamic organization in Türkiye at the end of the 1900s and early 2000s. The factors for this, according to Balci, was that communism functioned as a “threat” in Türkiye. Further Balci writes that the fear of communism infiltrating the Turkish society facilitated the development of Islam and Islamic consciousness, especially among young people in Türkiye (Balci, 2003, p. 152). At the beginning of the 1990s, when the Soviet Union collapsed, Fethullah Gülen saw the opportunity to build schools in the newly independent post-Soviet countries. Here, Gülen’s first aim was to “work for the re-Islamization of the Central Asian republics” (Balci, 2003, p. 166). The establishment is where Kazakhstan and Turkestan come into the picture.

The town of Kentau in Turkestan region was the first town in Kazakhstan to have a Kazakh Turkish high school (Yurtbilir, 2023, p. 146). It was opened in the academic year of 1992/1993 (Balci, 2003, p. 176), and it was an all-male school. In the same year, another male school opened in Almaty (Balci, 2003, p. 176). By 2003, when Balci wrote the article on “Fethullah Gülen’s Missionary Schools in Central Asia and their Role in the Spreading of Turkism and Islam”, Kazakhstan had the highest number of Gülen schools of the 25 countries

worldwide that had incorporated the same school system (Balci, 2003, p. 156). It had 29 schools across the country.

In 2013, there were 32 Kazakh-Turkish High Schools in Kazakhstan, according to Gaipov et al. (Gaipov et al., 2013, p. 421). The majority of these schools were purely boys' schools, seven schools were only for girls and two were mixed schools (Gaipov et al., 2013, p. 421). The structure of the schools varied, but the general tendency is that the students start in the school after 6th grade. They are required to take an entrance exam to start in the school (Gaipov et al., 2013, p. 421). In the summer before the start of the next academic year, the successfully admitted students are invited to live in the dormitories for a week (Gaipov et al., 2013, p. 421). They take classes and have quizzes and tests during this week, and at the end they are invited to a final interview with the board of the school (Gaipov et al., 2013, p. 421). Once the students get enrolled into the school, they have a four lingual education for the next five years (Gaipov et al., 2013, p. 421). Gaipov et al. write that the students had social subjects in Kazakh, while science subjects were usually taught in English (Gaipov et al., 2013, p. 421). Turkish was taught as a separate course next to the other courses. Russian was taught as a foreign language.

In 2025, when I visited one of these schools, the structure of the school system and the procedure for intake into the school seemed to be similar. For instance, we had a group of newly admitted students with us for one week in the summer. They had a full week of classes and lived in the dormitories. The education that the students received in the year of 2025 seemed to be somewhat similar to the four lingual education that Gaipov et al. described in 2013. Turkish was for instance taught as a foreign language to students. I observed a Turkish lesson where the students learned a Turkish song by heart. Later in the semester they performed the song in front of the rest of their school. However, since 2013, a major shift in the history of the Kazakh-Turkish High Schools happened in 2016 which not only caused the name-

shifting of the school, but also the reputation of the schools. A major incident happened in Türkiye, and it had ripple effects on all the Gülen movement schools across the world.

On July 15th, 2016, a group of soldiers attempted to stage a coup of the Turkish government, mainly in the cities of Ankara and Istanbul (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026). The main target of the attack was President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's administration and the government (Azeri, 2016, p. 465). The motive for the attack was to take political power in Türkiye. Siyaves Azeri writes that it was evident that the attack was planned and performed by people who followed Fethullah Gülen and his movement (Azeri, 2016, p. 465). Fethullah Gülen and his followers who previously were an ally of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Erdoğan's administration, were now officially referred to as the "Fethullah Gülen Terror Organization (FETO) — evolved from a piety-focused educational entity into a violent, secretive religio-political organization bonded by both religious ideas and material interests" (Yavuz & Koç, 2016, p. 137) , is what Yavuz and Koç write about the attempted coup in 2016.

In Central Asia, the Turkish government called for all Gülen movement schools to be shut down. Former president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev "rejected the Turkish request" and they promised to keep the schools open. The argument was that the education at The Kazakh-Turkish Lyceums (KTL) was of good quality. According to the article, Nazarbayev said that they would replace all teachers that were associated with the Gülen movement. After this message from the Turkish government, the board of the schools decided that they should rebrand the name of the schools instead of closing them down (Zhussipbek, 2019, p. 17). Hence, in 2017 these schools would change the name from Kazakh-Turkish Lyceum to "Science and Innovation High Schools" (Yurtbilir, 2023, p. 147). In Kazakh the schools are called "Білім инновациялық лицейлері" ("Bilim-Innovation Lyceums"). In 2019, when Zhussipbek wrote his thesis on the BIL schools, the schools were fully funded by 'Bilim-

Innovation' International Social Foundation, which was previously called 'KATEV' (Kazakh-Turkish Educational Foundation) (Zhussipbek, 2019, p. 18).

This specific lyceum in Turkestan is also the focus of this thesis. The school itself is placed in the new part of the city of Turkestan. I will start with describing the urban planning of the new part of Turkestan before going into the structure of the school system in Bilim-Innovation Lyceum in Turkestan.

Turkestan became a city in 2019, when the former prime minister Nazarbayev decided that Kazakhstan should develop the town of Turkestan. In 2018, the new part of the city (“жаңа қала”, “*jana qala*”) was built (Official Information Source of the Prime minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2020). Hence, in 2019 nine governmental and cultural buildings were built in the new part of the city. Since then, residential buildings have been built, and the city is still expanding.

When you enter Turkestan from the south part of the city, you exit the endless steppe and from the wide main road you will see moderately tall, white, green, beige or light-colored residential buildings. Along the main road there is an ice-skating rink, a shopping mall, the Akimat (governmental building) on the right and the high school a few blocks down the road to the left. Further, there is a clear divide between the new part of the city and the older part of the city. A bridge segregates the two parts. There is an attraction part, the Ahmet Yesevi University, Karavan Saray, the Mausoleum, before you get to the Bazar and the older residential part of the city.

The school is split into a boys' and girls' school with two separate dormitory buildings. Although they get their education under the same roof, the students are encouraged not to interact with the opposite gender. Therefore, the boys and the girls have separate classes, separate mealtimes in the cafeteria, separate dormitories, separate outdoor areas and separate graduation ceremonies.

The female students have female tutors, and the male students have male tutors. The tutors are usually graduated students from the same school system. They are in their early twenties, they usually live in the dormitories, and they help with the students with their homework and function as an adult whom the students can come to if they have any problems. The tutors who I talked with said that they form a close friendship with the students. The students can have both male and female teachers. But for a male teacher to work in a girls' school, he should be married, and the same goes for a female teacher in a boys' schools. The teachers for girls' school and boys' school have separate break rooms and cafeterias, but the male and female teachers can sit together and interact, in their breaks, whereas students do not interact with students of the opposite gender. Up until a few years ago, the high school in Turkestan was restricted to girls only, but then the boys' school in the town of Kentau just outside of Turkestan, was moved to Turkestan city. The two schools were then merged into one.

Common for the high schools previously established by Turkish networks across Kazakhstan, is the gender segregated education or the single-sex education. When Zhussipbek wrote his dissertation on the schools in Kazakhstan, he was particularly interested in how the single-sex environment affected students and alumni of the schools. In the responses from the interviewees, he finds that students valued single-sex environment education. They felt that it gave them better academic success and that it helped them focus on their studies without being distracted (Zhussipbek, 2019, p. 133). The interviewees were not directly asked about single-sex education, but those who talked about it in their interview seemed to value the advantages of being separate from the opposite gender in a school setting. Others had the impression that students who had received their education in a single-sex environment, would later become shy in the presence of the opposite gender, or not know how to act in their presence.

From my own conversations with my interviewees in Turkestan, one interviewee said something similar to Zhussipbek's findings in his research. The interviewee was an alumna of a BIL school, and she talked about what it was like for her to be in a mixed university. When she had to interact with guys in her cohort, she said she did not know how to talk to them at first. The guys reached out their hands to shake her hand, but as she was not used to that, she developed the habit of smiling and waving at them instead mainly to avoid physical contact with the opposite gender. Another interviewee told me that one reason behind the single-sex education, or the gender segregated environment, was in his opinion related to future marriages. The interviewee expressed that the main reason for a guy to interact in a mixed group of both genders or in a group of girls, was to look for his future spouse.

A third conversation that was held briefly with an informant connected to the high school, said that she did not think about having a boyfriend until she was finished with her studies, as in when she would graduate from higher education.

The schools were not the only educational system with gender segregated dormitories and classes. The university after Khoja Ahmed Yasawi was also divided into boys' and girls' dormitories. An alumna of the University and graduate of the first cohort said in a conversation that the concept of gender segregated education in Turkestan came as a shock to them. During the Soviet Union, they had been told that both men and women were equal, but with the establishment of the first Turkish Kazakh high schools only for males, it seemed to them that the two genders were different. The alumna herself remembered the difference between being a student in a mixed dorm and in a gender segregated dorm. The girls went from having tea with their male classmates in the dormitories to being restricted from each other's dormitory. It was a "social transformation" as the alumna called it. And it shaped the society around them.

“Muslim Identity” in Central Asia and Kazakhstan

I will analyze the existing research on “Muslim identity in post-Soviet secular Kazakhstan” and how researchers define “Muslim identity”. There are several approaches to the topic. “Muslim identity” can be looked upon from a top-down perspective by studying how the national identity of a country is perceived by governmental officials, but it can also be done as a bottom-up study of individuals in the society and how they see their own identity in the country that they are living in. This thematic review shows that both methods and approaches are used in academia. A topic that is closely connected with “Muslim identity” is that of security in the country. Scholars have drawn connections between radicalism of religious believers with this concept of Muslim identity. Where H  l  ne Thibault is trying to show how the state controls religious practices inside the country, Claude Salhani is more concentrated on falsifying the statement that all Muslim countries are terrorist countries, which was an opinion that occurred after the 9/11 attack by al-Qaeda in 2001. The first two sources are focusing on the state while the following after that is looking more at individuals and interacts with people living in the country. The following sources look at how the state builds mosques in order to keep the role of Islam visible in the country, while the government at the same time regulates any religious influence in order to prevent any form for radicalism. Other sources on Muslim identity portray the cultural role of Islam for individual people where Islam is not necessarily practiced strictly in their daily lives but rather holds the position of a cultural identity marker. The sources show that Central Asia’s form of Islam differs from other countries Islamic practices, and scholars point out that it has to do with the Soviet inheritance.

The first article that has been analyzed for this thematic review is the article “The Art of Managing Religion in a Post-Soviet Soft Authoritarian State” by H  l  ne Thibault. Her paper belongs to the field of political science. When Thibault attempts to place position Kazakhstan as a religious country, she clarifies that although Kazakhstan is of a Muslim identity, there are

differences in the practicing and belief inside the country. Thibault distinguishes between two areas in Kazakhstan, and writes that the north and the west are more religious than the south and the east (Thibault, 2019, p. 161).

To measure or identify the “Muslim identity” of Kazakhstan, Thibault portrays how Kazakhs practice Islam in the country. When measuring the religious practice of Kazakhstan, she bases it on the number of Kazakh pilgrims that are travelling to Mecca every year. Kazakhstan does not fill the quota, hence Thibault is arguing that Kazakhstan has a “moderate religious practice” (Thibault, 2019, p. 161). The number of mosques in Kazakhstan and the limited pilgrimage to Mecca by Kazakhs brings Thibault to the statement that Islam is more of an “important cultural marker than as a strict dogma that should regulate life” (Thibault, 2019, p. 161). Hence Muslim identity is what Thibault refers to as “an important cultural marker”.

Thibault argues that “the state promotion of a Muslim identity is aligned with an idealized conception of the secular nation” (Thibault, 2019, p. 162). The statement poses that, according to Thibault, the state of Kazakhstan is trying to uphold the image of being secular while it at the same time shows traits of Islamic beliefs, cultures and practices. Among the many traits of Islam in Kazakhstan is the city of Turkestan that is the home of the Mausoleum after Khoja Ahmed Yasawi. The mausoleum is according to Thibault one of many religious buildings restored or built by the state in the country, showing that the state upholds a Muslim identity on a visible national level, while it attempts to uphold secular practices and control of religion.

Muslim identity, as defined by Thibault, is a label used to describe the state of Kazakhstan. It describes Kazakhstan seen from above on a governmental level. Thibault is concerned with the interests of the Kazakh government while it tries to be a secular state.

Thibault also uses the concept “Muslim identity” to describe the people in Kazakhstan – that people are united by a common identity as Muslims (Thibault, 2019, p. 162).

There is a difference between local Islam and foreign Islam. According to Thibault, the state is concerned about religious traditions that come from outside of Kazakhstan (Thibault, 2019, p. 166). Thibault writes about increased extremism in Kazakhstan and argues how this has increased the government’s financial investments into preventing more extremism (Thibault, 2019, p. 164). Hence, the thesis touches upon the border between the Muslim identity that unites people, and the secular state that fears religious extremism in the country.

Thibault positions Kazakhstan as a country where Islam is practiced, but the state has strict control over the activities performed by believers. Hence, the concept “Muslim identity” implies that Islam is a cultural symbol, but the role of the religion is different as it is not allowed by the government to be freely practiced inside the country. Thibault lastly evaluates the potential of any religious extremism outbreak in Kazakhstan, and concludes that Kazakhstan is not likely to have this as the state controls most religious activities (Thibault, 2019, p. 174). This brings us to her conclusion which is that Kazakhstan is a “soft authoritarian state” (Thibault, 2019, p. 176). “Soft” compared to other religious states, but “authoritarian” because the state interferes and controls in religious activities.

Salhani comes from a different background than Thibault on the topic of Muslim identity. Having a background in Journalism, he approaches the question about religion in Kazakhstan with the starting point in the 2001 attack by al-Qaeda in the US, which happened ten years prior to the publishing of this book. The purpose of the book *Islam Without a Veil: Kazakhstan’s Path of Moderation* is to show that all Muslim countries are not necessarily “terrorist” countries. The author writes how Muslims all over the world were blamed for all the attacks, and the author calls it “ludicrous” (Salhani, 2011, p. 9) – “unreasonable”. The ambition

of Salhani is to show a nuanced picture of practicing Islamic countries or countries that have a Muslim identity.

There are strengths and weaknesses to the research, or the book that Salhani has written which touches upon the topic of Muslim identity. The author acknowledged that they position themselves as agreeing with the officials in Kazakhstan a lot of the time. The book is based on personal observations and interviews with local and foreign officials in Kazakhstan primarily, and other countries in Central Asia and Europe (Salhani, 2011, p. xiii). The American author spent one year in the countries to work on material for this book. The author travelled around with officials to see the countries. It gives a top-down point of view on religion in Kazakhstan, and what the officials think about the freedom to practice religion within their own country. For example, the author writes “Kazakhstan has demonstrated that one can follow Islam and at the same time remain fully open and receptive to outside ideas and not feel threatened by them” (Salhani, 2011, p. 23). When stating this, the author is more specifically talking about international relations as he further writes that “Kazakhstan has proven that a mostly Muslim nation does not have to be at odds – nor at war - with the rest of the world” (Salhani, 2011, p. 23). Thereby the argument is about security and relations to other countries. It seems that the author is trying to prove that a “mostly Muslim nation” does not necessarily declare war on western countries. The book appears to be an attempt to reunite the non-Muslim and Muslim world.

Salhani portrays Kazakhstan as “the success story of Central Asia” (Salhani, 2011, p. 29), basing it on the fact that “since independence Kazakhstan [has] projected a very different image of what people traditionally think of when they think of a Muslim national”. It is a “success story” according to Salhani because while Kazakhstan is a «mostly Muslim» country,

it manages to remain a peaceful country that is not in war. And that is where the Muslim identity of Kazakhstan comes in. It is, according to the author, a gentle, peaceful Islamic neighbor.

Regarding the method of the study, the participants are officials, not normal people. When the interviewees didn't speak English, he had a translator with him. I am wondering if material got lost in translation and if the author would have had a different impression of Kazakhstan if he had interviewed normal citizens.

The following study conducted by Yaacov Ro'i and Alon Wainer is a qualitative study where the researchers aim to understand which Islam has in individual peoples' lives in Central Asia. In contrast to the studies above, the results of this research is mainly based on qualitative interviews with the general population of Central Asia. In their research on Muslim identity in Central Asia, they found that out of 700 interviewees, only 12 of the respondents consider themselves as non-Muslim (Ro'i & Wainer, 2009, p. 305).

Keeping in mind what Thibault writes about the north-south division of Islamic belief in Kazakhstan, there is one weakness in Ro'i and Wainer's that needs to be addressed. They mention that although there is an equal distribution of participants from all of the four Central Asian countries under study, they had a lack of respondents from the north of Kazakhstan (Ro'i & Wainer, 2009, p. 304). It is important to mention in this thematic review because if the Kazakh respondents in the study were mainly from the south of Kazakhstan, the representation of the role of Islam in the lives of the Kazakhs is not representative for the whole of Kazakhstan.

The data presented by Ro'i and Wainer says that the younger generation tended to be more religious or religious oriented than the older population (Ro'i & Wainer, 2009, p. 306). The researchers based this on the number of respondents that reported that they prayed five times a day, and the proportion of respondents of both genders that prayed were equal. Hence, they find that young people of both genders are practicing Islam in their everyday lives more than the older generations.

On the contrary of the above-mentioned information about the practice of *namaz*, Ro'i and Wainer find that being Muslim in Central Asia does not necessarily mean that the believer should know even the most essential part of the religion. The researchers write that being born Muslim could outweigh the ability to list the five pillars of Islam (Ro'i & Wainer, 2009, p. 306). Ro'i and Wainer are touching upon what Thibault described as an "important cultural marker [rather] than as a strict dogma that should regulate life" (Thibault, 2019, p. 161). The researchers agree on the fact that Islam appears to be an identity marker and as something that the people under study in Kazakhstan and in Central Asia are born with.

Moving slightly away from qualitative studies, the next topic associated with "Muslim identity" is mutations of Islamic faith. In the chapter by Aurélie Biard on "Islamic Ethics in Muslim Eurasia: Prosperity Theology vs. Renunciation?", she states that especially young people in Central Asia are following Islamic movements like *Taglighi Jama'at*, whose mission is to spread the faith of Islam across national borders (Biard, 2020, p. 82). What Biard seems to be claiming here, is that young people in Central Asia (and especially those in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan as that is the focus of this study) follow a movement that unites Muslims despite existing national and territorial borders.

While still on the topic of Muslim identity, this review will return to the national Muslim identity that is modified and created by the state of Kazakhstan. Thibault mentioned in her paper that the government of Kazakhstan would restore or build mosques in Kazakhstan to uphold a Muslim identity, while trying to remain a secular country. Alima Bissenova writes in her chapter "Building a Muslim Nation: The Role of the Central Mosque in Astana" about the underlying reason for the government to invest money in building a modern, practical and accessible mosque to all visitors at any time of the day. She calls a section in her chapter "Rapprochement between the state and Islam" (Bissenova, 2016, p. 212), implying that there is an ongoing reconciliation process conducted by the state of Kazakhstan. Bissenova writes

that this need for reconciliation comes from the state's realization that it is "far better to ride the wave of Islamic revival for its own purpose than to try and suppress it" (Bissenova, 2016, p. 213). Bissenova also finds that the building of the Central Mosque from the state's interest in not being perceived as "Islamic extremism," "backwardness," and "archaism" (Bissenova, 2016, p. 213). The statement implies that there needs to be a balance of how much Islamic institutions and practices the state of Kazakhstan should allow.

Like Salhani, Bissenova brings the topic of "war on terror" in her chapter, and states that Kazakhstan's government is concerned with this topic. According to Bissenova, the government is working on the global connotations of Islam by clearly stating what is "good" and "bad" Islam, but what is "good" Islam is not easy to define (Bissenova, 2016, p. 217). Bissenova's research on the building of the Central Mosque in Astana and the government's concerns with different practices of Islam within Islam, signalizes that the government is on the one hand, scared of Islam becoming culturally overbearing over Kazakhstani life while on the other hand, trying to uphold the position of the religion in Kazakh culture. There is a fine line between culturally acceptable amount of Islamic influence in Kazakhstan and religious radicalism, is one way of reading Bissenova's work.

Moving on to the role of Islam in post-Soviet Kazakhstan and Central Asia, Bilal A. Malik writes what corresponds with Salhani's research that the way Central Asian Muslims practice Islam and the association of Islam in Central Asia is different from the way they practice it in other Muslim countries (Malik, 2019, p. 354). What he further goes on to say aligns with Thibault's statements about Cultural identity marker in Kazakhstan and Ro'i and Wainer writings about young Muslims' in Kazakhstan knowledge of Islam: that Kazakhs or Central Asians have "abandoned fundamental religious duties" (Malik, 2019, p. 354). Malik connects it with Communism during the Soviet Union and thereby implies that the difference between Central Asia Islam and other countries' Islam is caused by different

sets of regimes and ideologies. Malik's conclusion in this paper says that "Islam has little chance of becoming a centralized state ideology". Again, his points intertwine with Thibault's paper where she describes the state of Kazakhstan as a "soft authoritarian power" (Thibault, 2019, p. 176), implying that the state regulates religious activities and influences. From this statement it signalizes that the state is fearing that Islam will dominate the culture and views in Kazakhstan.

This thematic review has up to this point been revolving around Kazakhstan and Central Asia as a whole, but the following book that has been analyzed is one that is specifically linked to a city in Kazakhstan: Turkestan. In 1998, when Bruce Privratsky wrote his dissertation on "Turkistan: Kazak Religion and Collective memory", he defined "Muslim identity" for Kazakhs from Turkestan as something that they had "insisted" on having "received once and for all from their ancestors" (Privratsky, 1998, p. 23). According to Privratsky, the most accurate marker of Muslim identity for Kazakhs in Turkestan is the shrines of Muslim saints and graves of Muslim ancestors (Privratsky, 1998, p. 99). A central Muslim shrine is the Mausoleum after the Sufi leader Khoja Ahmed Yasawi which is in the center of Turkestan city. The author's statement about shrines being an important part of the Muslim identity for Kazakhs in this city shows that there is a bond with Islam prior to Russian and Soviet expansion into Kazakhstan. It is what Privratsky bases his book on, as he writes that Kazakhs in Turkestan hold a specific Muslim identity around the collective memory of the role of Islam in their culture.

The scholars above have addressed the issue of what role Muslim identity has in the secular space of post-Soviet Kazakhstan. The papers, chapters and books listed and

analyzed have shown different approaches to the topic. One approach is the political science scope on the topic by looking at how the government portrays the collective national identity of the country as being Muslim while at the same time inside the control and limitations of the secular state. The qualitative interview-based papers show how individuals in Kazakhstan, though mainly in the south and west of Kazakhstan, hold a Muslim identity that is not necessarily linked to a spiritual practice of the religion. Islam holds a cultural position in most people's lives; however, the practice of the religion does not have to be performed strictly.

This review is rather broad as the research question about how Muslim identity functions in secular Kazakhstan and if it has a role there at all. For further work on the topic, I suggest looking closer at specific areas of Kazakhstan and conduct qualitative research on which role Islam has in specific parts of the countries. As stated in these works, there will be a difference in the findings of research depending on the location. For example, the research conducted by Bruce Privratsky was a long-term fieldwork on a relatively small, but significant city in Kazakhstan. For my thesis this city is central as it holds the position of a city where Islam has a visible position while it is a growing city that has been invested in and modernized over the last decade.

Another limitation to the research done by scholars on the governmental viewpoint on Islam is that what is found by interviewing officials does not necessarily align with how people practice the religion in their personal lives.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

I am opening this section by asking the question that has been troubling my mind since my visit to Turkestan in the summer of 2025. “How do people in the city of Turkestan negotiate their identity between Islamic rules and secular norms on the topic of interactions between opposite genders?”. Specifically, I am curious about the social behaviours and the natural gender segregation that I observed in a high school in Turkestan. I am not talking about the segregation between the male and female students themselves. I am aware that the school is gender segregated because the school system is like that. I am interested in why the teachers that worked in the school also segregated themselves into male and female groups. In break rooms and cafeterias in the school, and when we went to restaurant outside of the school, I observed a clear segregation between the two groups of genders. In the interviews which I did in the summer of 2025 and winter of 2026, I could not quite clearly determinate one factor that made people behave in this way. What I am interested in finding in my data, is the origin of these social behaviours. To figure this out, it is necessary to have a clear perception of the role of Islam in the city of Turkestan, how Islam is present in the lives of the individual people in the city, what Kazakh traditions and norms are, and how they differ from Islamic norms.

“Cultural Muslims” and Pragmatic Religiosity

To start this section, I will go into a study that was conducted by Igor Himelfarb and Neli Esipova in 2016. The aim of the study was to assess the commitment to Islam in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and to understand Islamic religiosity in Central Asia. The researchers started off the study on Islamic commitment in Central Asia with the assumption that people there behave according to Western values (Himelfarb & Esipova, 2016, p. 254).

Through creating a survey where the respondents were asked to state to which degree that statement applied to them, the researchers created a Commitment to Islam (CTI) scale

(Himelfarb & Esipova, 2016, p. 254). In the survey, the respondents were asked about their commitment to eating halal food, doing Salat (five prayers every day), public Salat (when religious people go together to mosque to pray), their alcohol consumption, eating pork, wearing hijab, fasting during Ramadan, marrying within their own culture, pursuing hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca), and their opinion about Shariah laws in Kazakhstan (Himelfarb & Esipova, 2016, p. 256).

The results were supposed to illustrate, in my understanding, which items listed above that can be defined as items of high Islamic commitment and low Islamic commitment. Those items or actions that were of lower commitment to Islam can be referred to as cultural Islam. Those practices can be classified as cultural for people in Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan (as those were the countries of study for the research), and people who abide by these practices are not necessarily considered as highly committed to Islam.

Himelfarb and Esipova found that Ramadan was the item in the survey that had the highest discrimination property (Himelfarb & Esipova, 2016, p. 261), which can be interpreted in the way that the question about the individuals practicing of Ramadan made it simple to distinguish between people of high commitment to Islam and people with low commitment to Islam. It means that the people who were fasting during Ramadan in Kazakhstan were usually highly religious, according to the survey.

However, alcohol drinking was an item in the survey that made it harder to distinguish between people who were committed to Islam and those who were not (Himelfarb & Esipova, 2016, p. 261). It can be interpreted as a factor that did not necessarily mean that the respondents were highly religious, meaning that refraining from alcohol is more of a cultural Kazakh phenomenon rather than an indication that an individual is Muslim. Halal was the item in the survey that was the most difficult factor to determine as to whether the respondents were committed to religion or not (Himelfarb & Esipova, 2016, p. 261), also assuming that is of a

Kazakh cultural phenomenon. Lastly, hijab was the item that made it the easiest to identify if the respondents were religious or not.

In the conclusion the researchers write that there is a difference between social expectations in Islamic societies that most people follow, individual behaviours which Himelfarb and Esipova refer to as “religious doctrine”, and Islamic traditions and obligations that function more as expectations by the government (Himelfarb & Esipova, 2016, p. 263).

Secular Ethos and Piety

In Saba Mahmood’s study, her research is on women in piety movements in mosques in Egypt. The female movement adhered to the dual sides of Islam: subordination and agency (Mahmood, 2012, p. 158). Women may subordinate themselves to the patriarchal form of life, even if they choose to follow the gender norms in the secular circles they are in. Mahmood is illustrating that the women had an agency and that their religious belief was giving them a purpose – even if they were part of a patriarchal religion in her research in Egypt. The women came from different backgrounds. Some had high status jobs, others were poor. The minority were dressed in niqabs.

They all gathered there in the mosque to discuss Islam, and they adhered to the religious rules even in the outside world. By following Islamic norms and rules in a secular world when they were not forced to, showed that they had agency. In her fieldwork, Mahmood talked to four Muslim women who worked in public and private sectors. In their conversations, the women talked about the difficulty of living a “pious life” in a secular society. Mahmood writes that:

“Given the stringent demands their desire to abide by high standards of piety placed on them, these women made their realization of piety somewhat difficult. They often talked about interactions with unrelated male colleagues, riding public transportation in

mixed-sex compartments, overhearing conversations (given the close proximity of their coworkers) that were impious in character and tone, and so on. Often this situation was further compounded by the resistance these women encountered in their attempts to live a pious life from their family members – particularly from male members – who were opposed to stringent forms of religious devotion” (Mahmood, 2012, p. 155).

The research by Mahmood on these women shows a meeting of religious rules and secular society. These women are navigating through a secular society, between secular ethos and piety. The excerpt shows that the women chose to follow religious rules and were never forced by the environment of people around them to abide by high standards of piety. Mahmood is giving these women a sense of agency through her work. However, the women described this realization of piety as “somewhat difficult”. A similar experience of balancing between the secular ethos and piety will be shown later in this thesis in the interview excerpts from the interviewees included in this study.

Social Regulation: Neighborhood Pressure and Moral Surveillance

As Turkestan has become a city over the last six years and was a town before that, it might still have traits of social phenomena and concepts that usually characterizes smaller towns and villages. In particular, the concept is supposed to capture how religious institutions affect neighborhoods in secular Türkiye. The concept is called “neighborhood pressure” (“*mahalle baskisi*”) and is perhaps particular of the Türkiye that the sociologist Şerif Mardin studied, but parts of the concept itself can be translated to similar concepts that exist in Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries.

By stating that individuals’ religious views and practices, and even social behaviours, are impacted by other individuals, I am referring to the kind of social control that individuals enforce on each other in religious and secular contexts. Şerif Mardin starts with describing the

historical need for secularism – or laicism. It is the belief that the state should not support any religious views, typically within the same religion (Mardin, 1981). Mardin is making the argument that secularising reforms relate to “the underlying denominator of the liberation of the individual from the collective constraints of the Muslim community” (Mardin, 1981, p. 213). Further he is illustrating how the smallest unit of communities in the Ottoman empire looked like, and how the role of the “*mahalle*” (city quarter) affected the lives of the individuals.

The “*mahalle*” rules were quite flexible, according to Mardin, but this flexibility was more of a facade for the actual controlling rules of the neighborhoods. He writes that there were for example quite strict rules on how opposite genders could interact with each other (Mardin, 1981, p. 214) in small communities or “*mahalles*”.

The concept of neighborhood pressure is arguably a collectivistic feature of a society. Hence, I thought it would be relevant to dig deeper into the notion of the “individualistic West” and the “collectivistic East”. Zhandossova et al. divide the West and East clearly apart by stating that Western societies are individualistic, materialistic and have external relationships (Zakhay et al., 2024, p. 4). Eastern societies are more so based on religious values, according to the authors. Further, they state that in Eastern societies there is a strong correlation between moral values and religion. By this statement the authors are indicating that in moral actions when there is a doubt about what is right or wrong, the person will be able to guide themselves through religious values, viewpoints, norms and rules. If we are to apply the description and distinction between Eastern and Western societies, as they are told by Zhandossova et al., we should assume that religion is of high importance in individuals’ daily life in the East. Lastly, Zhandossova et al, write that a person with Eastern viewpoints and values will earn respect and evaluation based on their upbringing and morality (Zakhay et al., 2024, p. 4). Hence, we should interpret Eastern upbringing and morality as being rooted in religion.

When Eastern and Western values, rules and norms overlap, it causes problems or discomfort for individuals. At least that is what some of my interviewees talked about in our conversation. The overlap between Eastern and Western values, viewpoints, norms and rules is something that I will come back to in the presentation of my data and in the discussion of the data.

“Uyat” as a Moral Language of Islam and Tradition

In the previous section, I mentioned that in the high school, the male and female students are segregated in the school itself. I also wrote about a case study that was done by a PhD student where they had investigated what the experiences of receiving education at these schools in Kazakhstan were like.

One of my major interests related to the schools, and particularly a high school in Turkestan, is the concept of gender segregated education. Specifically, I would like to understand where the idea of gender segregation in education comes from. Hence, I will continue with exploring where the segregation between men and women in social settings comes from. Does it come from Islam, or is it imposed on people in their upbringing as part of Kazakh tradition? And if it is a social concept that neither is of religious origin, nor Kazakh tradition, where does the idea of gender segregation come from? These are the questions that I have asked myself throughout the work on this thesis project.

To start this section of gender segregation, I will go into the mechanism of “uyat” (“shame”) in Kazakhstan, and further I will use the definitions of “uyat” in the next chapter to understand if and how “uyat” is a part of the daily life of my interviewees.

To introduce the concept of Uyat, it is a mechanism in Central Asian countries that makes people adhere to social norms (Thibault & Caron, 2022, p. 1). Thibault and Caron write that the common expression in Kazakhstan is “uyat bolady” (“there will be shame”) (Thibault & Caron, 2022, p. 1). One of my interviewees in the interview described *uyat* as “the limit”.

One should not go further because “*uyat bolady*” (“there will be shame”). However, he also said that the limit for what *uyat* is, differs from person to person.

The scholar Moldir Kabylova starts with the hypothesis that people who are living in larger cities have a more individualistic viewpoint on their life, and contrary that people living in smaller cities are more likely to adhere to social norms created by the mechanism of *uyat* (Kabylova, 2022, p. 83). She made surveys and from those surveys she got 607 responses. From the survey data, she finds her hypothesis to not be true. According to the survey data, the size and density of the city of where the respondents were living did not have an impact on the respondents’ perception of the *uyat* (Kabylova, 2022, p. 83). It means that she could not find data that proved that people from bigger cities were less likely to follow social norms due to *uyat* in comparison to people from smaller cities.

I question the finding in this research, and Kabylova herself writes that the number of respondents from smaller cities in the survey was relatively small. She is further questioning whether the data is representative enough to make the claim that people from smaller cities are more affected by social pressure and the collectivistic mindset than people from bigger cities. If the data is representative, Kabylova’s argument can be connected with Mardin’s argument which was that individuals in small communities feels more controlled by their neighbors than those who are living in cosmopolitan cities.

Identity Construction: Group Identities

The last part of the theoretical framework for this thesis will be about how individuals construct their social identity. Since this thesis is a study of people from a specific community, I am bringing in the concept of group identities and how people construct their identity as a member of a group of people. Turner and Onorato write that “In group interaction, people act not in terms of their individual differences but collectively, in a unitary and consensual fashion, as a function of their shared group memberships, norms, and values” (Turner & Onorato, 1999, p.

17). According to Turner and Onorato, individuals are not individuals in group interactions, but they have a separate identity as part of a group.

Individuals define themselves as much as they define others. The scholars write that “People stereotype themselves and others in terms of salient social categorizations, and this stereotyping leads to an enhanced perceptual identity between self and ingroup members and an enhanced perceptual contrast between ingroup and outgroup members” (Turner & Onorato, 1999, p. 21). When individuals define themselves as having certain values and views, and create stereotypes of what their group is like, they also tend to do the same with other groups. It creates a feeling of being close to your own community and at the same time very different from other groups of people. My question is what happens if one individual has a membership in several groups that the individual defines themselves with, but these groups stand contradict with each other.

Chapter 2: Methodology

To answer the research question, which is “How do people in the city of Turkestan negotiate their identity between Islamic rules and secular norms on the topic of interactions between opposite genders”, I have done literary reviews of relevant literature on the topic, and for the data collection I have conducted qualitative interviews with people that associated with a specific chain of schools in the city of Turkestan.

Sampling Strategy and the Interviews

The interviewees were collected by using the strategy of snowball sampling. The researcher had access to people working at a specific school, and hence organized interviews there. Other informants were collected through the snowball method by asking the interviewees if they had acquaintances who would be interested in participating in the interview. The requirement for the interviewees was that they should be residents of Turkestan or have resided in Turkestan for most of their life, and preferably they should be connected to the specific school where the researcher was doing the fieldwork.

10 interviews were conducted in the period of June 2025 and January 2026. Although eight of the interviewees were connected to the school and these are the answers that have been used in the thesis. The requirement for the interviewees to be included in the study was that they should be either living in the city of Turkestan or they should be from Turkestan, and they should have a connection with what was formally known as the Kazakh Turkish Schools that are widespread in Kazakhstan and abroad.

The interviewees are between the age of 18 and 50 years old, and most of them are males. Of the eight interviewees included in the data analysis, six out of eight are Kazakhs by ethnicity. Two of them are Uzbeks but have grown up in Kazakhstan. The youngest participant is 18. The oldest participant was 50 at the time when the interview was conducted. Most of the

respondents are graduates from high school, at the age of 18 or 19 years old. The interviewees are multilingual speakers, and they all have proficiency in Kazakh and Russian, while most are proficient in English and the minority can communicate in Turkish. The respondents hold bachelor's degrees or are in the process of pursuing a bachelor's degree. These degrees have been obtained within the borders of Kazakhstan, although one person has obtained a bachelor's degree in Türkiye. There is a much higher proportion of male interviewees than female interviewees in this study, which can potentially make this study not representative in terms of gender. Two females and eight males were interviewed for this research thesis.

The interviewees were interviewed individually, and the interviews were semi-conducted. The topics covered in the interviews were upbringing, religious values, social interactions with the opposite gender and *uyat* (shame). Regarding language, eight out of ten interviews were conducted in English. The two exceptions were interviews held in Russian. The researcher had not acquired fluency of the Russian language at the point when the interview was conducted, and hence the interview lacks nuances and details that were more likely to be found in the other interviews. However, the researcher found it to be important to include people of different views and backgrounds, and therefore Russian conducted interviews into the research seemed only to enrich the data. Not all the interviewees' answers were used for this specific thesis project. (Appendix #10)

Coding, Categorizing and Analysing the Data

The interviewees' answers were processed in two different ways. The answers were all analyzed manually. The first method was to categorize them into topics that were asked about in the interviews. The second method was to make open codes for the excerpts from the interviews. The open codes were created to see the pattern of what the different interviewees were talking about (Appendix #11). The codes were concerning religious aspects of their lives,

while other codes were about social interactions and gender segregation, and a large proportion of the codes covered internal conflict within the individuals as they described expectations from society and rules imposed on them. What was interesting to see was how this conflict between the society's expectations and religious values sometimes collided, and that for some interviewees these conflicting values caused a stress within themselves or a feeling that they should be acting or thinking in a different way from what they were already doing.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations of the Method

The topic of this thesis project was decided upon by the researcher in the period of the fieldwork in the summer of 2025 after the researcher had made observations in a work setting. The community of people studied in this thesis is small, and although the questions asked by the researcher and the answers given by the interviewees are not necessarily sensitive, the researcher is aware that there is a risk of the interviewees being identified based on their answers. To deal with the risk of identification of respondents, the researcher did not use the names of the interviewees or where they met, but only the age, gender, educational background and work field of the interviewees as this information was necessary to draw a clearer picture for the answer to the research question.

Another point to keep in mind about the small community of people under study, is that when asking people if they wanted to participate in the study, it was a challenge to keep the information about the participating interviewees confidential from the other participants. The participants would talk among themselves to figure out if they knew of someone who would be interested in participating in the study, and hence the interviewees in the study are not completely anonymous for the other interviewees.

Though the current thesis has a supporting amount of interview data, it lacks enough participants and a variety of people. There is an unequal proportion of men and women in the

study, and the background of the participants is very similar, hence making it hard to defend the generalisability of the study to the broader Turkestan and Kazakhstan.

The interview questions were written and approved before the researcher had acquired full knowledge about the Kazakh Turkish schools, and hence the questions themselves are not narrowly focused on the school system and religious practice, but rather on a broad range of topics within Kazakh culture and religion.

Chapter 3: Findings, Discussion and Analysis

There were several main topics that appeared from the interview data. The interviewees talked about their own internal feelings or their own internal moral compass which guided them through interactions with people. The second one was the rules, norms and expectations put on individuals by society in social interactions. The third one was the rules about social interactions according to Islam and how it functions in a secular society, and the fourth one was a global topic of differences between Western and Eastern values. The interview data presented below is mainly the interviewees responses. The researcher's questions in the conversations are marked in italics. The transcripts are written in the exact way that the interviewees expressed themselves.

Significance Turkestan as a City – Religion and Culture

The city of Turkestan and its religious significance must be briefly mentioned before moving on. A quote from interviewee 4 underlines how deeply rooted she perceives Islam to be in the city.

“Well, in Turkestan, Turkestan is a religious country. We have the Khoja Ahmed Yasawi Mausoleum. So, it has affected our culture a lot.” (Interviewee 4, Female, June 2025)

The interviewee is creating a link between the physical place of Turkestan and the religious institution of the Mausoleum after Khoja Ahmed Yasawi. She states that the place is religious and hence underlining the importance of religious values for the people living there.

A similar statement was made by Bruce Privratsky in 1998 when he wrote a dissertation on Muslim identity in Turkestan. He writes that “The dynamics of religion and ethnicity are nowhere more powerfully felt by the Kazaks than in their historic city of Turkistan” (Privratsky, 1998, p. 1).

Following Islamic Rules in Interactions, Friendships and Relationships

When interviewee 4 says that “it [religion] has affected our culture a lot,” she refers to how people are expected to behave in her community. She continues by saying that:

“For example, men and women have to look for their boundaries, like not interrupt their boundaries. And also, in Islamic tradition, the friendship between male and woman are not allowed.” (interviewee 4, Female, June 2025)

What the interviewee is referring to here is perhaps deriving from the chapter An-Nur from the Quran which says that “And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and guard their chastity, and not to reveal their adornments except what normally appears” (Quran, 2026, 24:31).

Looking at the next excerpt from the interview with interviewee 8, it seems that the ideas about what Islam allows and does not allow is also present in this interviewee’s life.

“What impacts your choice of friends to hang out with? I don't know. I just usually avoid talking to girls. You what? Avoid talking to girls usually. Because I think it's a religious thing. How so? I cannot explain it in English. What does religion tell you about talking with girls? Well, you can talk with them, like, in working ... But you cannot, like, talk with them. You can talk with them in work and studies, but when can you not talk with them? You cannot talk with them in a way that relationships or something like that, being friends with them, it's not allowed.” (Interviewee 8, Male, January 2026)

“It is not allowed,” he says about having relationships or making friends with girls, and he “think[s] that it’s a religious thing”. Though Kazakhstan is a secular country and the law in Islam is not posed by the state on individual people, these two interviewees say that Islam tells them to not mingle and make friends with the opposite gender. It is “not allowed”, according

to them. Though in the example below provided by a different interviewee, he acknowledges that there is a difference between how religious rules for interactions function versus norms of the secular society:

“And how does religion impact the way that you understand these group settings again?

Like how guys and girls hang out? Yes. There's nothing wrong about talking with a girl.

But I cannot... I... As a religious person, I cannot afford myself to touch a girl, even shake hands. But in our country, it's not that much a strict law, but I try not to.”

(Interviewee 3, June 2025)

Hence, interviewee 3 describes a different environment of religious laws and secular norms. Though he is living in a secular country, he chooses to abide by religious rules. And therefore, the argument can be that the interviewee navigates through a secular ethos by abiding to high standards of piety. I am connecting the interviewee's experience with Saba Mahmood's study *Politics of Piety: Islamic revival and the feminist*. Though there are differences in the circumstances that the subjects are living in, whereas the Mosque in Mahmood's research is a religious space while the school in this current study is a secular space, the groups of people under study do share similar experiences. The women in Mahmood's research are activists in Egypt challenging the secular government, while the interviewees in this current study are negotiating what kind of identity they should have as religious believers in the secular Kazakhstan. They do not complain about the secular government directly. On the contrary, they are trying to understand how tradition and religion both shape their views. Interviewee 3 is for example not forced to live a pious life, but he chooses to do so. And that is how he negotiates his religious identity in a secular environment.

The Impact of the Family Institution

Interviewee 8 is not only saying that he does not interact much with the opposite gender. There are other people in his life, like his mother, who has a huge impact on his views:

“My mom usually said like, “don't talk with every girl, don't have a girlfriend, if you don't intend to marry her”. She was saying like, “search for girlfriend when you are ready to marry. If you intended to marry, find the one you want and talk with her and if she's the one like marry her” because she just like saying “don't destroy someone's girl like in this in this way like if you like have relationship with other girl. But if you don't marry her like it's it will be in future someone's wife and you will destroy someone's wife” in some way she was saying it was okay yeah. *What does it mean to destroy someone?* Not destroy but like the way that don't talk to other like yes, it's like if you're not married just don't talk with them because it's difficult to find out.” (Interviewee 8, Male, January 2026)

The interviewee keeps repeating that his mother has told him to “not destroy [the reputation]” of someone’s girl by not marrying her if he has had a relationship with her. It becomes apparent in the statement made by the interviewee about his mother’s advice that marriage is central in their culture. Contact with a person of the opposite gender, is not allowed by the interviewee’s mother. If we are to look at this as a trait from Islamic values, it can come as from Surah An-Nur in the Quran which for men says that, the “Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and guard their chastity. That is purer for them” (Quran, 2026, 24:30). Understood from the statement of the mother of interviewee 8, this purpose should be marriage. Otherwise, an interaction or relationship with the opposite gender for a man is not acceptable. At least not for her son.

The institution of family is strong in Kazakhstan, according to Ganiy Karassayev et al. They write that the family “serves as the primary institution for upholding traditional norms, preserving customs and shaping individual identity based on kinship, nationality, socio-political affiliation and religious beliefs” (Karassayev et al., 2024, p. 52). Ganiy Karassayev et al. further write that “this phenomenon stems from the ethnocultural developments during the Soviet era, where tradition preservation shifted predominantly to the family sphere. As a result, religious traditions gave way to secular family customs” (Karassayev et al., 2024, p. 52). The argument is further that importance of religion was reduced, and that the families possibly undertook secular traditions.

In the interview excerpt for this current research where the interviewee is talking about his mother’s opinions, it does illustrate that family has a vital importance in at least this interviewee’s *habitus* (Bourdieu & Nice, 1977) – or the way he sees his world. Interviewee 1 describes an upbringing where they were all told to be separate from the boys:

“mostly with my um ... like with the girls female friends uh I don't like – I don't have much male friends so it's more about with the girls. *Okay. Do you think there is a reason for that? Why is it that it's mostly girls?* Because even from our childhood we've been educated to be separate. Girls will have to be with the girls and boys with the boys. And it's like... Boys and girls can be if only if they are relatives. Or they may be like wife and husband. If they are partners, or it's – it's not like common for us but we have some some of us like so nowadays but actually we have like mixed gender like we are mixed sometimes it's not okay but we have educated before to be like separate. *Okay, and who tells you this that to be separate?* It came from our grandparents Yes, but now our parents are not educating us in this kind of way. *Why do you think it has changed?* I think it's all about mentality because previously from the time of our grandparents it was Soviet Union or it's more i think it's more about religion I don't know I think it's

about that but our parents are can really get us what is the now what's the position of our like children". (Interviewee 1, Female, June 2025)

The interviewee is comparing the upbringing that she received from her grandparents and parents and implies that there is a conflict between the two ways of raising a child. While her grandparents told her to only interact with girls, her parents did not force that upon her. This statement shows a conflict in the way that the interviewee perceives herself. While stating that she has been allowed to interact with boys by her parents, she still adheres to the values and norms that her grandparents gave her. She also brings up the times of the Soviet Union and underlines that those were different times. Hence, she is implying that the gender segregated times belonged to the past Soviet period, and not the present time in her life.

On the topic of parents' opinions on interactions between opposite genders, interviewee 3 also demonstrates that he follows his parents' advice on interactions with the opposite gender. Even though he does not mention religion being a reason for his or their views, the institution of marriage is strong in the statement he makes below. The part prior to this excerpt is about his parents' opinions of with whom he should interact with on a daily basis and if the parents would have any opinions on him interacting with women:

"Yeah, probably they [my parents] will say, like, "You can look for a bride there [in a mixed-gender group of people] and you can get on well with the girls and then maybe if there is a chance to get introduced with a decent girl then so be it". *What girl?* The girl that can be a very good spouse to you. *How much influence do your parents have on which spouse you choose?* Not much as far as I am concerned. For my entire life they didn't interfere with any choice I made, like the life -changing choices. The fact that I chose my major in university, they accepted it without any hesitation or doubt. And the same goes for choosing a bride." (Interviewee 3, June 2025)

Hence, the interviewee is holding the same opinion as the one of interviewee 8's mother: that the interaction with the opposite gender should have the purpose of marriage.

Between Two Worlds: Secular Ethos and Piety

The following interview data illustrates the navigating between secular ethos and piety.

“But in some kind of way it's impossible to be religious. Like if I said as I said before like being in one room with the male and female it's for example it's forbidden [according to Islam] but nowadays we can't follow these rules. I think it's a little bit difficult nowadays because of like because of because we now, we work together like male and female and we have some um work relationships, like friend relationships, or for example if I studied, we have some cases when we have to work together.”

(Interviewee 1, June 2025).

The interviewee is saying that combining the two – religious laws and secular ethos – in the work environment is “impossible”. The two ways of navigating in life is contradicting, and difficult to combine. Further, a different interviewee is naming the feeling it causes for them to handle these values together.

English translation: “The whole problem arises because of that, we have, specifically, specifically Kazakhs do not have a specific indicator. No clear definition, a clear pathway that they follow. There is eastern culture, there is western culture. That is called modern[ity] – but this is western culture. This is not modern culture, western culture is. And Kazakhs, people here, are between these two cultures. They cannot live purely live according to western culture, because they have eastern origin.” (Interviewee 2, June 2025) (Appendix #5)

Group Formations

The interviewee is clearly distinguishing between what he defines as Western culture and Eastern culture. Coming back to Saba Mahmood's secular ethos and piety, the interviewee here defines Eastern culture as a religious culture. He continues by saying that:

English translation: "But they [Kazakhs] cannot live purely as Muslims, because there is modernity. And therefore, they found themselves between two cultures. And this is discomfort to us. It creates discomfort in us. *Why?* Because if you do this it will be wrong. A sin. And if you do like this then it will be not modern. *But how do you live according to both western culture and ... ?* And this creates discomfort in us."

(Interviewee 2, June 2025) (Appendix #6)

This excerpt is indicating that the interviewee perceives Western "modern" culture as contradicting to Eastern religious culture. This is when the interviewee claims that the two supposedly opposing cultures existing in Kazakh societies contradict with each other. The distinction between Eastern and Western culture in this culture can be explained by using Turner and Onorato's Self-categorization theory (Turner & Onorato, 1999, p. 22).

The individual perceives himself as having a group identity where they are part of two groups; an Eastern and a Western cultured group. What is shown in the data here is that these two opposing cultures, as the interviewee presents them, are contradicting with each other. It breaks the image of the group being built on a certain set of values. This is important to understand because it seems that the individual in the group is having an identity crisis about who they [Kazakhs] are as a people.

The scholars Abdikakimov and Karibayev presented the idea that in modern Kazakh societies, the importance of religion is reduced as a result of competing values of tradition and modernity (Abdikakimov & Karibayev, 2024, p. 115). This idea implies that modern societies

are secular in nature, and not religious. It corresponds with interviewee 2's answer about religious societies being "eastern", and modern societies being secular, hence what the interviewee defines the Kazakhs as a group as Western. Though this idea by Abdikakimov and Karibayev might be true to a certain extent that increased modern secular societies reduces the importance of religion in society, it is rather the conflicting values of religion and secular values that are making it difficult for Kazakhs, according the interviewee 2, to live "purely as Muslims, because there is modernity" (Interviewee 2, June 2025).

Discomfort, Culture and Uyat

Another factor that caused discomfort according to one interviewee is related to *uyat* (shame).

He is saying that:

"Can you for example give 1 gram [golden engagement ring to your partner]? That would be *uyat*. And who says that it is *uyat*? No one. *But how do you know or how do you feel it?* It is not comfortable. Everyone will feel discomfort. *Uyat* is what creates discomfort in us. *And how do you feel, that uyat ...?* If a person does not feel discomfort, He can follow this trait of *uyat*. The line of *uyat* is not the same for everyone. Those who adhere to western cultures, for them [the line] might be here [he points somewhere on the table]. And for them, maybe *uyat* is here. These are stretched things." (Interviewee 2, Male, June 2025)
(Appendix #7)

The interviewee is saying that *uyat* is a concept that makes people feel uncomfortable when doing actions. *Uyat*, as mentioned in the theoretical framework is according to Thibault & Caron a mechanism in Central Asian countries that makes people adhere to social norms (Thibault & Caron, 2022, p. 1). This is also what the interviewee is saying here in this statement about the feeling of "discomfort" being caused by the mechanism of *uyat*. When the interviewee describes *uyat* as "the limit" and that one should not go further because "*uyat bolady*", he also says that the limit for what *uyat* is, differs from person to person. What the

interviewee more specifically is referring to, is the distinction between Eastern and Western cultures. As the interviewee has already stated, Kazakhs are between “two cultures” – the East and the West – it becomes ambiguous where the line of *uyat* is if the concept of shame is different in Western and Eastern cultures.

Invisible Line

“There is an invisible line. If you noticed, in a lot of people are sitting separately. Women are separate, men are separate. *Where is this?*” ... You saw it yourself. You were present. Do you remember in Turan back then, did you not really notice that men and women sat on [either] side. And or colleagues sat there, yes? But why was this? Who separated them? No one separated them.” (Interviewee 2) (Appendix #8)

Interviewee number 3 is describing a scenario when the colleagues in a workplace went out to eat together, and the men and the women sat divided into two groups by the table. The interviewee is bringing this up as part of the question about how comfortable the interviewee is in the interaction with women. Further, when interviewee 2 is asked to give an explanation or their opinion about why the men and women separate like this, they answer that:

“It is in their nature. And then, when the spaces for men were not enough, three of our colleagues were forced to sit on this side. ... And they hesitated. There were other latecomers before them too, but they took chairs with them and sat down. Even though there were empty chairs, available places next to you. Yes. No one sat down there. And only when there was already no space left here [where the men sat], only then the men sat down with the women. Now, why did they sit here? Because this is Eastern culture. And why did the three of them sit with you? This is now Western culture. This is like Eastern culture. That is when women sit like this, and men [over] there. That is Eastern.

They have their own aura. Their own atmosphere. Their own topics. Their own conversations.” (Interviewee 2) (Appendix #9)

The interviewee is bringing the concept of Eastern and Western culture, as to explain the physical movement of three male colleagues from one side of the table. The interviewee uses this example to illustrate two different cultures, as he calls it. He distinguishes between what he defines as Eastern and Western culture. According to the interviewee’s explanation, Eastern culture in this example was when men and women sat separately. Western culture was the movement that the male colleagues made to the other side of the table, where the women sat. As the interviewee said, no one told the men to try to fit into the crowded space of the men’s side of the table. Yet, they hesitated to move to the other side where the women sat.

Conclusion

In this current research study, the thesis title is “Muslim Identity in the City of Turkestan: A Qualitative Study of Social Interactions”. The aim of the thesis was to be able to answer the question “how do people in the city of Turkestan negotiate their identity between Islamic rules and secular norms on the topic of interactions between opposite genders”. The answer to this question does not have one clear explanation. It is rather nuanced. To answer that question, an extensive literature review was done to visualize the social and religious landscape of the city of Turkestan in Kazakhstan. Turkestan is a melting pot as it is the home of the Mausoleum after the Sufi Saint Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, while it is also home to many different ethnic groups and a new generation of people who have moved to the newly built part of the city in the last decade. It is, as I have written, a city that has been impacted by Kazakh Turkish relations, Turkish soft power and civic institutions, hence the building of educational institutions and religious buildings.

To analyse the interviewees’ answers, I have used the concepts of group identity, *uyat*, neighborhood pressure, and Saba Mahmood’s example of secular ethos and piety. The interviewees’ show that they perceive themselves as members of different groups; they are Muslims, but part of a secular workplace or school. They are also having a conflicting dual belonging as they are citizens of a secular country and religious community, meaning that they both have Western, modern values and Eastern traditional and religious values. It was described that this navigation between secular norms and piety or religious rules as “discomfort” to them. Hence, the understanding from these interviewees in this study is that religious rules conflict with secular values. Some interviewees describe an everyday life where they abide by religious rules by distancing themselves from the opposite gender almost completely, while others find it hard to do this as their workplace environment does not allow this practice. About *uyat* and neighborhood pressure, in social interactions, the interviewees acted based on internal, moral

feelings of right and wrong, but they were also highly influenced by their upbringing and opinions of others. From the answers of the respondents, there was not one consensus to the question about how they negotiate their identity and interactions with the opposite gender.

Limitations

This literature review has provided a historical and religious background of the city of Turkestan, as well as a deeper understanding of Kazakh traditions and mentality. However, the literature review falls short on providing a better understanding of gender segregation between men and women in terms of social interactions. The key searches that has been used in this review, which are “gender segregation Kazakhstan”, “gender segregation Turkestan”, “(gender segregation or single-sex environment) and Kazakhstan” and “(gender segregation or single-sex environment) and Turkestan” does not provide articles that specifically describe the phenomenon of natural or unconscious gender segregation or single-sex environment in either Turkestan or Kazakhstan. Perhaps the key search was not specific enough as it seemed to give sources on gender itself and the definition of gender, rather than the interaction between people of opposite gender.

Regarding the social concept of “neighborhood pressure” (*“mahalle baskisi”*), it was difficult to find english sources on the subject. It was a term that the sociologist used in an interview once, and the term itself is rather specific to secular Türkiye. A long line can be drawn to the Central Asian term “uyat” (“shame”), but it does not equate to neighborhood pressure fully.

The literature review reveals a gap of research done on this specific interaction between men and women in social settings. At least of the sources found in key searches for literature it does not describe the interaction between men and women from a religious point of view nor from a social point of view. However, as mentioned before, the key search might not be specific

enough or perhaps other search engines could have been used to find sources that would be relevant for this type of sociocultural study on a city and a group of people that are religious.

Appendixes

Khoja Ahmed Yasawi Mausoleum photographs

Appendix #1: Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, south-west side.

The south-west side of the Mausoleum where the writing "Allah Muhammed" is repeatedly written in squares with blue writings. Photo taken by the researcher in the spring of 2025

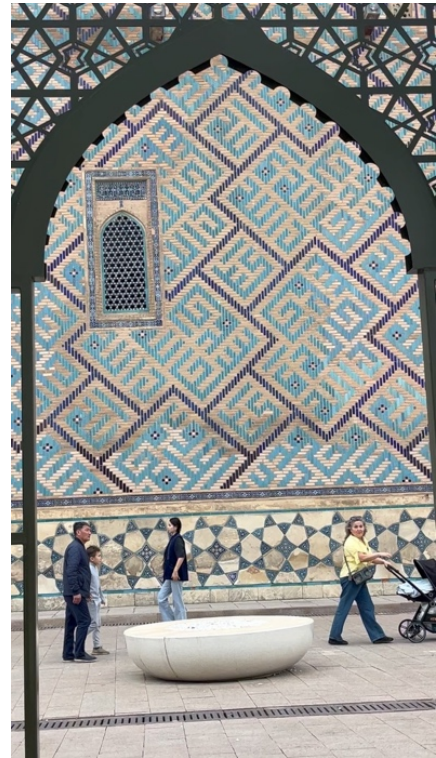


Appendix #2: Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, west side.

The Arabic writing of "Rahim", Rahman" is written on the column in squares with blue letters. Photo taken by the researcher in the spring of 2025



Appendix #3: Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, north-west side. The Arabic writings on the wall says “subhanallah walhamdulillah”, which means “Glory to Allah” and “Praise be to Allah”. Photo taken by researcher in the Spring of 2025.



Appendix #4: Registan, Samarkand, Uzbekistan.

These are two out of the three madrasas that made out the centre of Samarkand during the Timurid Empire from the 9th to the 15th century. Photo taken spring 2025.



Russian transcripts

Appendix #5:

Russian transcription: “вся проблема возникает из-за того, что у нас именно именно у казахов нет нет именно указать. Нет четкого определения, четкого пути, который они следуют. Есть восточная культура, есть западная культура. Называется современная, но она западная культура. Это не современная культура, это западная культура. И казахи, здесь люди, между этими двумя культурами, они не могут чисто жить по западной культуре, потому что у них восточное происхождение.” (Interviewee 2, Male, June 2025)

Appendix #6:

Russian transcription: “Но не могут чисто по-мусульмански жить, потому что есть современность. И поэтому они оказались между двумя культурами. И вот этот дискомфорт у нас, он создает у нас дискомфорт. Почему? Потому что если ты поступишь так это будет неверно грех а если ты поступишь вот так тогда это будет несовременно. *но как вы живете за оба запада культура и...?* И это нам создаёт дискомфорт.” (Interviewee 2, Male, June 2025)

Appendix #7:

Russian transcription: “Вы, примерно можете подарить вот 1 грамм. Это будет уят. А кто скажет что это уяд? Никто. *Но как вы знаете или как вы чувствуете?* Это неудобно, все там будут чувствовать дискомфорт. Уят это то, что создает нам дискомфорт. *И как вы чувствуете, что ... ?* Если человек не чувствует дискомфорта, он может перенести вот эту черту уят. То есть черта уят не для всех одина. То есть черта яд не для всех одина. Те, кто придерживаются восточной культуры, для них, возможно, здесь уят. А для них возможно здесь уят. Это растяжены вещи.” (Interviewee 2, Male, 2025)

Appendix #8:

Russian transcription: “Это невидимая грань. Если вы заметили, когда во многих местах люди сидят отдельно. Женщина отдельно, мужчина отдельно. *Это где?* ... Вы же сами видели, присутствовали. Помните на турану тогда вы разве не заметили что мужчины а женщина сидит с этой стороны. А, наши коллеги там сидели, да? Ну зачем это было? А кто их развел? Никто не развел” (Interviewee 2, Male, June 2025))

Appendix #9:

Russian transcription: “У них это заложено. И теперь, когда мужчинам мест не хватило, трое из наших коллег-мужчин были вынуждены сидеть с этой стороны. ... И они колебались вот. Угу. До них тоже были опоздавшие. Но они принесли стулья и притеснились. Хотя возле вас был пустой стол, свободные места. Да. Никто туда не садился. И только когда здесь уже мест вообще не осталось, только тогда мужчины сели к женщинам. Теперь, почему они здесь сидели? Потому что это восточная культура. А почему они вот трое присели к вам? Это уже западная культура. Это как бы восток культуры. Это когда женщины сидят там, а мужчины там, восток. У них своя аура, у них своя атмосфера, у них свои темы, у них свои беседы. У мужчин своя аура, свои беседы. И это западная культура, когда три мужчины были здесь.” (Interviewee 2, Male June 2025)

Appendix #10: **Interview Questionnaire**

1. Introduction questions

- What is your gender? (Male / Female / Prefer not to say)
- What is your age?
- What is your ethnicity?
- What is your current education or occupation status?

2. Sociolinguistic questions

- What is your native language(s) / mother tongue?
- Which languages do you know (including your native language) and how well do you know them?
- As a child, what languages were spoken in your home? (And in your education?)

3. Working in groups

- Which group activities are you comfortable with?
- How often do you participate in group activities? (e.g., school, community, religious)
- In case you are uncomfortable with group work, what changes would make group settings more comfortable or inclusive for you?

4. Interacting with the opposite gender

- How confident do you feel in same-gender groups? [Why?]
- In cross gender group settings, do you feel comfortable voicing your opinions?
- How is your participation in gender-mixed groups compared to gender-segregated groups?
- Do you feel more reserved when there are members of the opposite gender in the group? Why?
- What challenges do you face when participating in group settings with the opposite gender?

5. Religion, opinions and values

- How important is religion in your daily life? (1 = not important, 5 = very important)
- How is your preference of group settings shaped by your understanding of Islamic values? Explain it.
- Do you avoid certain behaviors in mixed-gender groups out of religious or cultural respect? Give me some examples.
- Do you think religious guidelines promote respectful and balanced group interaction?
 - o (Scale: Strongly disagree – Strongly agree). Give me details about it.
- How does your faith influence your behavior in group work?

6. Parents, relatives or other people's opinions

- How do your parents react to your gender-mixed group activities? Do they support you? Do they object to you meeting with them? Why?
- How does your family or community influence how you choose your group settings in terms of their gender? Explain it.

7. Upbringing of children and opinions

- Who raises the child in the family? The mother, father, grandmother, grandfather, siblings or extended family?
- Who is the main responsible family member to raise the children?
- What specifically are taught from mothers and from fathers?
- How should a boy be raised ideally? How does the ideal son look like?
- How should a girl be raised? How does an ideal daughter look like?

8. Opinions about the relationship between men and women

- Which relationship are male and females supposed according to marital status?

- Can an unmarried female be friends with an unmarried male? Married female with unmarried male? Unmarried female with married male? Married female with married male?
- If a woman and a man are alone in a private setting, how should they interact?
- If a woman and man are alone in a public setting, how should they interact?

9. Consequences in case of breaking the norms of gender interactions (*uyat* (shame))

- What are the consequences in case individuals break the norms on interactions between opposite genders?
- How does this affect the individual's family?
- Who decides what these consequences look like?
- Do you agree or disagree with these consequences?

10. Awareness of the origin their values and viewpoints:

- Who or what has impacted your views on normalized gender interaction? A person, institution, environment or society? Why is that? Which role do they/it have in your life?
- What part of your culture do you think has impacted your views?
- Why is this cultural view prevalent for you, do you think?

11. Hijab

- Which roles does hijab have in Turkestan?
- What are your viewpoints on the usage of hijabs?
- How do you interact with people who are wearing hijabs?

Appendix #11: **Code Book**

Gender interactions	
Gender_segregation	The interviewee is talking about the topic of gender segregation.
Parents_gender_segregation	Parents have been telling the interviewees to separate from the opposite gender.
No_gender_segregation	When the interviewee says that gender segregation does not exist.
Gender_roles	When the interviewee says that men and women have different tasks, resulting in them not spending time together. Or that there are different expectations to them, and different stereotypes on what makes them happy.
Grandparents_gen_seg	When the interviewee says that the grandparents expect them to be separated.
Work_gen_mixed	When the interviewee says that in the workplace, males and females work together.
Relatives_mixed_gen	When the interviewee says that males and females can be mixed or have physical interaction in forms of hugs or handshakes, only if they are relatives.
Marriage_mixed_gen	When the interviewee says that males and females can only be mixed if they are married.
School_mixed_gen	The education tells students to be mixed.

East_gen	When the interviewee says that gender segregation or differences between men and women belong to the Eastern cultures.
School_mixed_gen	The education tells students to be mixed.
Marriage_scout_int	When the interviewee says that the purpose of interaction with the opposite gender is to find a future spouse.
Edu_segreated	When the interviewee says that they were separate from the opposite gender in their educational system.
Religion	
Religious_upbringing	The interviewee is raised to be religious.
Relatives_mixed_gen	When the interviewee says that males and females can be mixed or have physical interaction in forms of hugs or handshakes, only if they are relatives.
Religious_segregation	When the interviewee says that religion tells them to be segregated.
Religious_belief_full	The person is fully committed to a religion.
Religious_belief_trying	The person is a believer but trying to be more religious.
Religion_Society_conflict	When there is a conflict between religious values and values in the workplace or educational institution of the interviewee.
Religion_Society_no_conflict	When the interviewee reflects that they are not affecting by conflicting religious and societal norms in the workplace.
Religious_problems	“If she is with her husband in the group of the male friends it's okay but if she is alone, this is the problem. Why is it a problem? Because a woman cannot be with other men. It's all about

	religion problems and because nowadays we heard some news about the behavior of the men. It's not safe.” (Interviewee 1).
Religion_forbids	When the interviewee says that religion forbids them to do something.
Internal feelings	
Discomfort_conflict_uncomfortable_insecurity	The interviewee experiences some kind of stress, discomfort or tension, or has conflicting opinions with the norm, or if they experience discomfort by living between conflicting values in the society.
Introverted_shy	Whenever the person says that they are introverted or shy as a response to the question about mixing with the opposite gender. Or in general shy when talking with strangers.
Sceptical	Whenever the interviewee is sceptical of the opposite gender.
Personal_boundaries_threat	Something is threatening the personal boundaries of the interviewee.
Distrust_in_men	The interviewee is expressing that men are dangerous or not trustworthy.
Comfort_feeling	When the interviewee says that they themselves feel comfortable, or other people would feel comfortable in a certain setting.
Moral_feeling	When the interviewee says that a person can feel if something is right (or <i>uyat</i> to do). Or when the interviewee says that it is their inner state that tells them that something is right or wrong.

Insecurity_on_behalf	When the interviewee is concerned that another person will feel uncomfortable or insecure.
Lack_trust_insecurity	When the interviewee says that a married person does not trust their spouse to interact with the opposite or the same gender.
Distrust_in_women	When the interviewee expresses distrust in women who are being too close or too curious or wants to interact with them.
Laws/norms/expectations posed by society	
Prohibited_нельзя_indecent	When the interviewee says that something about mixing of genders is not okay, or that topics of conversations are not okay around the opposite gender, or any physical interaction with the opposite gender.
Quiet_humble_modest_pretty_daughter	Interviewee says that the ideal daughter is quiet, humble, modest and good looking.
Force_вынужденность_mixed	When the interviewee talks about gender mixing only in the case of force, compulsion. The invalid has no other option than to sit with the opposite gender.
определенная_грань_edge	Certain rules are clear for everyone.
Uyat_shame_moral	There is shame connected to actions, or when the word "shame" is used by the interviewee to describe how people feel in situations where they interact with the opposite gender.
Consequences_without_husband	When the interviewee talks about there being consequences if a girl meets up with male friends at night without being with her husband.

Eyes_neighbors	The neighbors control the behaviour of individuals based on the concept of <i>uyat</i> (shame).
Two_ways	When the person tries to follow both religious and societal norms in the workplace.
Geographical differences	
Rural_urban_differences	When the interviewee says that there are differences between the city and the villages on opinions or practices on something.
East_west	When the interviewee mentions something about there being a difference between East and West values in the way they think.
Between_cultures	When the interviewee says that they live between cultures, and that is specifically about Eastern and Western cultures.
Genetics and culture	
Kazakh_segreated	Interviewee says that Kazakh culture makes people split into groups of men and women.
Genetic_culture_determined	The interviewee says that culture is genetical, hence there being similar traits of behaviour among people of the same culture or from the same people.
Traditional_values_formed_centuries	When the interviewee says that a minority of the opposite gender can sit with the other gender.
Noone_dictated	When the interviewee says that the people were not told by anyone to split up into groups.

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