



**BULAN INSTITUTE**  
for PEACE INNOVATIONS

**A SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS OF ISLAMIC  
EDUCATION OF CITIZENS OF THE  
KYRGYZ REPUBLIC: STUDYING  
ABROAD”, Report**

**Report by the Bulan Institute for Peace Innovations**

**in cooperation with the State Commission for Religious Affairs  
under the President of the Kyrgyz Republic**

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## **CONTENT:**

1. Introduction .....	3
2. Religious educational institutions of Kyrgyzstan and conditions of education.....	5
3. In which foreign countries do Kyrgyz citizens receive religious education?.....	8
3.1. Where did members of the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan and the Council of Ulema receive their education?.....	9
3.2. Egypt: the most prestigious institutions.....	10
3.3. Turkey: strong theological faculties.....	12
3.4. Jordan: Islamic education on the British model.....	13
3.5. Saudi Arabia: free luxury education at a price.....	15
3.6. Pakistan: registered and unregistered Madrasas.....	17
3.7. Other countries: Kyrgyz citizens in the madrasas of Syria, Malaysia, India, and Bangladesh.....	19
4. Religious education of Kyrgyz citizens abroad and state policy.....	21
4.1. The role of education in Islam and the tradition of studying abroad in the pursuit of knowledge .....	21
4.2. State policy and legislative norms .....	23
4.3. Restrictions to be introduced and a prime-list of institutions to be proposed.....	25
4.4. Is it necessary to control religious education received abroad? Opinions of theologians and experts .....	27
5. Conclusions .....	30

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## 1. Introduction

This report was prepared by the Bulan Institute for Peace Innovations (hereinafter – the Bulan Institute) in cooperation with the State Commission for Religious Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic. The main purpose of the report is to analyze the countries in which citizens of Kyrgyzstan receive their religious educations, the form and quality of their Islamic religious educational institutions and current trends in receiving education abroad by Kyrgyz citizens. In Kyrgyzstan, there has been a noticeable increase in interest in religious education in general, and in foreign taught classes in particular.<sup>1</sup>

Every citizen of Kyrgyzstan is guaranteed freedom of religion<sup>2</sup> and the right to education regardless of gender, nationality, language, social and property status, health, the type and nature of occupation, religion, political and religious beliefs, residence and other circumstances<sup>3</sup>. Article 6 of the Law on “Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations”, adopted in 1991 around the time independence was proclaimed, guarantees access to various types and levels of education to individuals regardless of their attitude toward religion.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, in addition to the protection of these rights, one of the main tasks of the Commission for Religious Affairs and the Bulan Institute is contributing to the assurance that citizens receive both quality religious education and the promotion of conditions amenable to a healthy education sector.

With the arrival of independence, Kyrgyzstan has witnessed a rise of interest in religion, quickly filling up the religious and spiritual vacuum that was formed throughout many years of restrictions by the Soviet Union. One of the most visible indicators of this process is the extraordinary speed of mosque construction and the ubiquitous opening of madrasas. For example, prior to sovereignty in 1990 there were only 39 mosques in Kyrgyzstan. Today, together with *namazkana* (prayer rooms), this figure has increased over a hundredfold. Currently, 112 Islamic religious educational institutions operate in Kyrgyzstan. Understandably, with the growth of mosques and madrasas the requirements and expectations of the qualifications of religious workers has also increased. As a result, expanding interest in the Qur'an and the Arabic language grew into a need for increased access to religious education. Citizens have, in turn, started actively leaving the country in the pursuit of religious education abroad.

There are no relevant government agencies or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that have information on the exact number of Kyrgyz citizens who have gone abroad in order to receive religious education. It is a matter of serious concern that despite the fact that the law stipulates referral and registration by both a local religious institution and the State Commission for Religious Affairs for those who want to receive religious education abroad, the number of citizens going to foreign Islamic religious institutions without these referrals, often on tourist visas and personal invitations, has increased over the past ten years. Some of these students receive education at questionable and unvetted educational institutions, particularly in countries such as Pakistan and Bangladesh, and there is a real danger of their

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<sup>1</sup> “The Concept of the state policy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the religious sphere for 2014-2020”, approved on 14.11.2014 by the decree of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic, Available: <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/68294>

<sup>2</sup> The Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic from 28.12.2016.

<sup>3</sup> Article 3 of the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic “On Education”, from 30.04.2003.

<sup>4</sup> Article 6.1 of the Law “On Freedom of Religion and Religious Organizations in the Kyrgyz Republic”, as amended 31.12.2008.

recruitment into extremist organizations. Upon their return to Kyrgyzstan, these students may well become distributors of dangerous or violent ideologies and policies at home.

In the years of independence, the departure of citizens abroad for the purposes of receiving religious education took place according to the following mechanism: a religious organization issued a referral to the State Commission for Religious Affairs; on the basis of this referral an application on each citizen was filled out. After that, the State Commission for Religious Affairs gave its consent. With the beginning of the war in Syria and the deterioration of the security situation in the Middle East, religious organizations became increasingly apprehensive about issuing such referrals. The absence of referrals led in turn to a sharp decrease of people applying to the State Commission for Religious Affairs for consent. At the time of writing, it is the third year in a row in which the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan has refused to send citizens abroad to receive religious educations. Accordingly, since 2012 there has been an increase in the numbers of citizens who leave the country without any agreement or knowledge of state bodies, mostly on tourist visas, via personal invitations, or with the help of charity funds, in order to receive religious educations abroad.

Streamlining the chaotic process of Kyrgyz citizens going abroad in pursuit of religious education as well as improving the quality control of foreign religious education is one of the main tasks facing the state today. That is why one of the main directions and tasks of the government "Concept of state policy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the religious sphere for 2014-2020" is the state regulation of religious studies and education.

For this reason, a working group has developed a concept aimed at reforming religious studies and religious education. Additionally, in order to develop the relevant normative and legal acts aimed at better regulation of religious education, the State Commission for Religious Affairs submitted amendments and additions to the Law "On Freedom of Religion and Religious Organizations in the Kyrgyz Republic" to the parliament. Zamira Tursunbekova from the State Commission for Religious Affairs states, "The issue of regulating religious education remains one of the main problems in today's struggle against radicalism and extremism. This phenomenon shakes the very principle of secularism of the Kyrgyz state, poses a threat to the rights and freedoms of citizens, and causes a threat to public and national security"<sup>5</sup>.

Currently, there is no specific comprehensive research into the process and problems faced by Kyrgyz citizens receiving Islamic religious education abroad. While there was a 2014 study entitled "Religious Security in the Kyrgyz Republic" of the Moscow office of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace which covered the issue of obtaining religious educations abroad, but this was not the main topic of the study.<sup>6</sup> In addition, in 2014, Nazira Kurbanova, a Professor and a doctor of historical sciences, published the scientific article "Islamic Education in Kyrgyzstan".<sup>7</sup> It notes that Kyrgyz citizens freely travel abroad to receive religious education on personal invitations, tourist visas, through private sponsors or intermediaries.

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<sup>5</sup> Bulan Institute's interview with Zamir Tursunbekov, the expert at the State Commission for Religious Affairs, November 24, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Emil Nasritdinov, Nurgul Esenamanova, "Religious Security in the Kyrgyz Republic", 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/files/ReligiousSecurityinKyrgyzstan.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Nazira Kurbanova, "Islamic Education in Kyrgyzstan", in *Central Asia and the Caucasus Journal*, Volume 17, Issue 1, 2014.

This study of the Bulan Institute and the State Commission for Religious Affairs looks into the religious educational institutions of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, Pakistan, Jordan and other destination countries, the specifics of their religious education systems, as well as issues related to the education of Kyrgyz citizens in these countries, including official statistics and opinions of known religious figures. In addition, this report analyses which countries and educational institutions well-known theologians, such as regional *qazi* (judges), the Muftiate, and members of the Kyrgyzstan ulema council, attended.

## **2. Religious educational institutions of Kyrgyzstan and conditions of education**

As clearly stated in the Constitution of Kyrgyzstan, the principle of state secularism underpins all law. At the same time, since 80% of the population is Muslim, there is a strong desire for Islamic education and Qur'anic study in society. The Law "On Freedom of Religion and Religious Organizations in the Kyrgyz Republic", adopted after the country gained independence in 1991, promoted the revival of all religions and simultaneously opened a wide path for the introduction of Islam into public life. As a consequence, while every year the number of religious educational institutions has grown exponentially, legislation and government have not been able to keep up. Laws or institutions that could bring the activities of these educational institutions under a single standard were not adopted in a timely manner.

Thus, during the past 25 years of independent Kyrgyzstan, plenty of religious educational institutions have appeared in Kyrgyzstan which do not have a license or developed curriculum.<sup>8</sup> If we compare official statistics, the number of children who study in madrasas increase every year. According to the State Commission for Religious Affairs, in 2013 the number of madrasas reached 67, Islamic higher education institutions 11, and the number of students in them amounted to 4,565 people.<sup>9</sup> In February 2017, the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan informed Bulan Institute that the total number of those who received knowledge in madrasas was already at least 6000.

Currently, in Kyrgyzstan, 112 Islamic religious institutions have been registered with the State Commission for Religious Affairs. These are the Islamic University of Kyrgyzstan (former Islamic University named after Khazreti Umar)<sup>10</sup>, Rasul Akram University, Khasreti Osmon Islamic Institute, the Nur al-Islam Institute, Abdullah ibn Masud Madrasa, Maatkabyl *uulu* Sharshenbai Madrasa and others. In addition, theological educational institutions funded by the Department of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) of Turkey have been opened, the main feature of which is the issuance of state-recognized diplomas. Among them are 102 madrasas, only 78 of which are actually operating.

According to the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan (SAMK), 78 madrasas currently operate in the country. In Bishkek 5, Chui Valley 28, Talase 4, Issyk-Kul Oblast 1, Naryn 2, in Jalal-Abad 6, Osh Oblast 19, Osh city 4, and in Batken 9 madrasas. According to the specialist of the training department of the DUMK Kushtarbek Mamatov, more than 6000

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<sup>8</sup> Final report of the situational research-analysis, Eurasia Foundation Central Asia, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> From the archives of the State Commission for Religious Affairs under the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic: an account of religious organizations and associations as of 01.02.2013.

<sup>10</sup> In July 2017, the Islamic University of Kyrgyzstan received a license from the Ministry of Education and Science of the Kyrgyz Republic; for more information see: <https://www.azattyk.org/a/28615715.html>

children are receiving education in these madrasas. The smallest madrasas have no less than 20 students, while the largest ones have no more than 200.

The activities of the madrasas are under the control of the Board of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan, and training programs are approved by the Ulema Council under the Muftiate. In July 2017, for the first time in the history of Kyrgyzstan, the Islamic University of Kyrgyzstan received a state license. According to the former rector of the University, Mars Ibrayev, it is correct for madrasas to receive state licenses. He states, "To date, due to the fact that the issue of licenses for madrasas has not been raised, the state does not recognize their diplomas. Children, graduating from these madrasas often remain in a difficult situation since with their certificates they cannot find work or go to universities. That's why it would be good if the madrasas would be given a license from the Ministry of Education. The possibility of further education at the universities would be open to madrasa graduates. The Islamic University received a license this year. We think that is great!"<sup>11</sup>

All madrasas in Kyrgyzstan are privately owned and are financed from private sources. Those wishing to open a madrasa must first register as a religious institution with the Ministry of Justice. Madrasas are opened only after registration at this state agency. Having collected all necessary documents for opening, one should go to the State Commission for Religious Affairs to submit the curriculum of the madrasa, a list of teachers and their summaries, and clearly indicate the financial support of the madrasa. As confirmed to the Bulan Institute by the State Commission, the Muftiate, and the regional *qaziyats* (Islamic district) are also entitled to open madrasas. Zakir Chotaev from the Commission noted, "The Muftiate is registering with us. Regional *qaziyats* are also considered as religious organizations, therefore, they have the right to open madrasas. The opening of a madrasa by mosques also does not contradict the law."<sup>12</sup>

Among the 78 madrasas currently operating, one can find a vast range of quality. These include madrasas in miserable near-medieval conditions as well as modern ones with computer classes. The Bulan Institute's previous research revealed the existence of two types of madrasas in regards to registration status and quality.<sup>13</sup> The first type is madrasas that work closely with the Muftiate, are registered with the State Commission for Religious Affairs, and have dedicated buildings and appropriate conditions for teaching children. The second type of madrasas are opened under mosques, often in the style of *hujra*.<sup>14</sup> These madrasas generally lack the conditions necessary for teaching children. They function at the expense of the *sadaqah* (donations) entering the mosques and other charitable donations. Most of them do not have registration and train on average 15-20 children.<sup>15</sup>

According to the Constitution, in Kyrgyzstan, religion is separated from the state, so madrasas and other religious educational institutions do not receive government financial support.

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<sup>11</sup> Bulan Institute's interview with Mars Ibraev, November 15, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Bulan Institute's interview with Zakir Chotaev, April 5, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Bulan Institute's Report, "*Religious Education in Kyrgyzstan: Madrasah System in Urgent Need of Reform*", April 2017, available at: <https://bulaninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Report-on-REUs-in-English.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> *Hujra* - an informal method of teaching religion, usually under a tutor or spiritual leader.

<sup>15</sup> Following the results of the inspection in Bishkek in May 2017, it was revealed that five madrasahs have no elementary conditions and permits. For more information see: <https://sputnik.kg/Radio/20170301/1032008566/almambetova-nacharsharttagy-medreselertabyldy.html>

Therefore, the educational process and living conditions in madrasa hostels vary and depend directly on the capacities of the private sponsors financing them. While some have libraries and computer classes, others lack basic conditions, have no tables, and students have to study, sitting on their own laps with mats underneath. Through the Bulan survey on madrasas, it became obvious that education conditions and adherence to the educational curriculum set by the Ulema Council depend largely on the level of financing coming from either wealthy Arab countries, charitable organizations, or from mosques and others in the form of *sadaka* (alms-giving).

In poor quality madrasas, especially those located in housing districts on the outskirts of cities, conditions are often deplorable. Their activities are often carried out in damp areas, there are poor conditions for children in dormitories, and they rarely meet sanitary hygienic requirements. At the same time, one can find well-funded madrasas with high-quality living conditions some even with their own farm with cattle or gym for training. In many Islamic educational institutions, however, curricula are limited to memorizing the Qur'an and teaching traditional rituals necessary in the family and household sphere.<sup>16</sup>

According to Bulan Institute research, the need for madrasas for literate and qualified teachers is high. It is officially confirmed that only 20% of theologians and imams who teach in madrasas and other religious schools have a basic religious education.<sup>17</sup> Of the two thousand employees of the same Spiritual Directorate of Muslims, 70% do not have special religious education. Only 2.5% received a higher spiritual education either in the country or abroad. 20% graduated from madrasas and 10% completed special short-term courses for imams.<sup>18</sup>

Even this education has limited value. State research itself states that, "there is no difference in the system of instruction in madrasas and Islamic institutions of higher education, in these educational institutions, basically, education is reduced to memorizing the Qur'an, and the methods of committing *ibadat* (worship) are taught, so this system does not meet state and Islamic educational standards and requirements in any way."<sup>19</sup>

Disadvantages in religious education have a direct negative impact on national security, potentially lead to the radicalization of society, and contribute to the spreading of religious extremism. There is not a qualitative development of religious education, simply a quantitative expansion.<sup>20</sup> For example, today's Islamic education is not only something that does not provide for an educational specialty but does not even meet modern comprehensive educational requirements. There is no particular difference between madrasa programs and institutes, their diplomas are not recognized by the state and do not have authority.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Results of the monitoring of religious educational institutions by the State Commission for Religious Affairs, from 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Officially noted in the Concept of the State Policy of the Kyrgyz Republic on Religious Affairs.

<sup>18</sup> S. Murzubraimov, Associate Professor at Osh State University, "*Theological faculties as the newest alternative in the dissemination of religious values in society*", Bulletin of Osh State University, <http://www.oshsu.kg/univer/temp/url/ilim/20144-2-v.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> Officially noted in the Concept of the State Policy of the Kyrgyz Republic on Religious Affairs.

<sup>20</sup> Bulan Institute's Report, "*Religious Education in Kyrgyzstan: Madrasah System in Urgent Need of Reform*", April 2017, available at: <https://bulaninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Report-on-REUs-in-English.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> From discussions of the interdepartmental Working Group on reforming religious education in Kyrgyzstan.

Under the decision of the Defense Council of the Kyrgyz Republic dated February 3, 2014, the "Concept of state policy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the religious sphere for 2014-2020" was adopted, and the "modernization of Islamic pedagogy and education" was one of the main tasks. Currently, a working group created by the Kyrgyz government and the State Commission for Religious Affairs has developed a provision on the reform of religious educational institutions. "After the adoption of the Concept of 2014, a lot has been done. While planned activities were not funded for the initial two years, this year funds have finally been allocated. Now we will soon adopt a provision on the reform of religious educational institutions and start implementing it," says Zaiyrbek Ergeshov, director of the State Commission for Religious Affairs.<sup>22</sup>

In 2014, within the framework of the Concept adopted in the Security Council, the "Yyman" (Conscience) Foundation was established to increase the knowledge of theologians and imams. Currently, this fund trains teachers of madrasas, imams, *qazi* and theologians, sometimes even paying a monthly scholarship. As the head of the "Yyman" foundation Nurzhigit Kadyrbekov noted, this year 2300 imams were studied: "Repeating the lessons learned, more than five thousand imams were trained in general. The training sessions consist not only of religious disciplines, but there are also such subjects as state policy in the religious sphere, information technology, law, as well as culture and religion, rhetoric, and tolerance. Integrating secular subjects with religious disciplines, we try to educate modern imams with advanced views."<sup>23</sup>

### **3. In which foreign countries do Kyrgyz citizens receive religious educations?**

Currently, in order to receive religious educations abroad, Kyrgyz citizens generally go to study at religious institutions in Pakistan, Egypt, Jordan, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. In this section, we will focus on the following issues: what type of educational institutions exist in these countries, which of them have a recognized international reputation, what are their characteristics and quality of education. Additionally, we will review them in light of where established and prominent Kyrgyz theologians have studied.

Relying on the results of our research, educational institutions of Egypt are considered to be the best in terms of the quality of religious knowledge as well as necessary modern conditions for education; Al-Azhar University especially is considered to be the most prestigious, among theologians. The Chairman of the Ulema Council Abdyshukur Narmatov studied in Egypt and the ex-rector of the Islamic University Mars Ibraev also received his education in Egypt. Regarding educational institutions in Turkey, they are known for their tolerance as well as the integration of both secular and religious education. Since 1993, many Kyrgyz citizens have studied at the theological faculties in Turkey as part of an official agreement. According to analysts, religious educational institutions in Jordan are also considered prestigious. The well-known theologian Kadyr Malikov points out that in Jordan, Islam is studied on a scientific basis.

Today, a growing number of Kyrgyz nationals obtain their education in Saudi Arabia; this, however, is a cause for serious concern, since Saudi religious institutions often support Salafist ideology. Despite this, interest in Saudi Arabia is recently increasing. For example, the well-known theologian Chubak azhy Zhalilov studied in Saudi Arabia.

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<sup>22</sup> Bulan Institute's interview with Zaiyrbek Ergeshov, November 24, 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Bulan Institute's interview with Nurzhigit Kadyrbekov, November 16, 2017.

In regards to Pakistan, until 2014 many Kyrgyz nationals obtained their education there. After 2014 however, since Pakistani authorities undertook reforms in their own system of religious education imposing restrictions on foreign students, the number of Kyrgyz students studying in Pakistan decreased dramatically. The Mufti of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan Maksatbek azhy Toktomushev and several members of the Ulema Council also studied in Pakistan.

There are also those who managed to obtain their education in Syria and Lebanon before the military actions taking place in the region. Currently, among Kyrgyz nationals, there are also those who go to Bangladesh and India for a 3-4 month religious courses. In the next section, we will focus on each of the above-mentioned countries and their religious educational institutions.

The Bulan Institute conducted a survey among theologians, imams and workers of the Muftiate on where they received their religious education. According to the results of the survey, many theologians, imams, and heads of Islamic educational institutions obtained their education at the University of Al-Azhar in Cairo, as well as higher educational institutions in Turkey, often supported by the “Turkiye Dianet Wakfa” Foundation. Others attended the Umm al-Kura University in Mecca, universities in Jordan and Syria, and some studied in madrasas belonging to the "Tablighi Jamaat” movement in Pakistan.

Another important detail is that most of the authoritative religious leaders of Kyrgyzstan holding prestigious positions in the Muftiate, went to study abroad only after receiving their basic religious education in Kyrgyzstan.

### **3.1. Where did members of the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan and the Council of Ulema receive their education?**

The Spiritual Board of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan consists of:

1. Mufti of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan, Maksatbek Toktomushev, was educated between 1996-2005 at the University of Al-Arabiya Ravand in Pakistan;
2. *Qazi* of the city of Bishkek, Madzhitov Sadrid Khalimovich, graduated from the Islamic University "Abu Hurayra" in Pakistan and the madrasa "Abdullah ibn Masood" in Bishkek;
3. *Qazi* of Talas region, Bapiyev Taalaybek, studied in 1996-2000 in the madrasa "Ali ibn Abi toolib" in the Talas region;
4. *Qazi* of the Issyk-Kul region, Sagyndykov Almazbek Sharshenbaevich, was educated in 1994-2004 in Egypt at the University of Al-Azhar;
5. *Qazi* of Naryn oblast, Ibraev Mambetasan was also educated in Egypt, at the University of Al-Azhar in 1992-2002;
6. *Qazi* of Jalal-Abad Oblast, Zakirov Abdulaziz, studied courses on memorizing the Koran in Turkey, as well as graduating from the Imam Tirmiziy madrasa in Jalal-Abad Oblast;
7. *Qazi* of Osh region, Samidin Atabaev, graduated from the Kazan Islamic University;
8. *Qazi* of the city of Osh, Sarybaev Ubaidilla Sultanbaevich, studied at the Abdujapar Institute in the Osh region, in 1993-97.

### **Where were members of the Council of Ulemas educated?**

The Council of Ulemas of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan<sup>24</sup> is considered the main body after the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan. Below is the list of countries and educational institutions where the members of the Council of Ulema received their religious education:

1. Chairman of the Council of Ulemas, Abdishkir *azhy* Narmatov, studied from 1989-93 at the University of Imam-Bukhari in Tashkent and from 1992-2000 at Al-Azhar University in Egypt;
2. Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ulemas, Mars *azhy* Ibraev, studies from 1993-98 at Islamic University of Kyrgyzstan, and from 1998-2002 at Al-Azhar University in Egypt;
3. Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ulemas, Abibilla *azhy* Kadyrberdiyev, was educated at the Islamic madrasa "Azireti Usman" in the village of Orukzar of the Kadamjai district and the Islamic institute "Rasul Akram" in Bishkek;
4. Zamir *kaara* Rakiyev studied at the University of Al-Azhar in Egypt;
5. Tazhibay *azhy* Baititov studied at the Islamic Institute "Abdyjapar" in the village of Kara-Suu, Osh region;
6. Kadir *azhy* Malikov, is a graduate of the Islamic Law Department of the Jordanian National University (Amman), 1997-2001;
7. Baktiyar Toktogaz *uulu* studied from 2004-2009 at the University of Tripoli (Lebanon), the faculty of Islamic law (shariyat);
8. Zhigitali *azhy* Ismailov studied at the Daarul-Oluum University in Pakistan;
9. Kabylybek *azhy* Akmatov studied in the madrasa of Pakistan "Madrasa Arabiya Rayvand";
10. Kenzhetay *azhy* Kurmankhodjaev studied at the University of Al-Azhar in Egypt;
11. Kimsanbai *azhy* Abdurakhmanov studied at the University of Bukhara Mir-Arab and the University of Jordan (Amman);
12. Kuchkbai *azhy* Sadillayev studied at the Islamic Institute in Tashkent;
13. Abdymanap *azhy* Masaliyev studied at the Imam-Bukhari University in Tashkent;
14. Mamasabyr *azhy* Dosbolov in *hujra* (Moldo Sabir);
15. Nurdin *azhy* Asomudinov in *hujra* (Moldo Nadir);
16. Saidamir *azhy* Jainaliev in *hujra*;
17. Nyazali *azhy* Aripov studied at Ankara University theology of the faculty;

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<sup>24</sup> The Council of Ulema conducts its activity on the basis of the "Regulations on the Council of Ulema", approved by the Kurultay. Kurultay elects members of the Council of Ulema, consisting of 21 people, for three years.

18. Farhat *azhy* Yusupov, studied at the Faculty of Theology of the Osh Humanitarian University;
19. Chubak *azhy* Zhalilovm, studied from 1992-96 at Islamic University in Kyrgyzstan and from 2000-2006 at Umm al-Kura University in Saudi Arabia (Mecca);
20. Zhakshylyk *azhy* Borochorov, studied at the Faculty of Theology of Ankara University and the Department of Theology of Kyrgyz State University named after Arabaev (Magister Program);
21. Abdymalik *azhy* Tursunbekov graduated from the Theology Department of the University of Ankara.

### 3.2. Egypt – The most prestigious institutions

Receiving a religious education in Egypt was always considered extremely prestigious. Due to this, among the imams, Muftiate workers, and theologians in Kyrgyzstan there are many who conducted their studies there. Egypt has a very rich history of religious education with the oldest higher education institution, the Muslim University of Al-Azhar, founded in the 10th century and rightly considered to be one of the oldest Islamic universities in the world. Among the Arab countries, Egypt was one of the first to take religious education under the state wing in the early 90s.

Among the theologians of Kyrgyzstan, those who graduated from Al-Azhar University include:

the chairman of the Ulema Council Abdyshekkar Narmatov, deputy Mufti of Kyrgyzstan Zamir Rakiyev, famous theologian Zhorobai Shergaziev, ex-rector of the Islamic University Mars Ibraev and others. According to Esengeldi Zhumabaev, the expert at the State Commission for Religious Affairs, religious knowledge obtained from the University of Al-Azhar, is suitable and similar to local (Kyrgyz) traditional values of Akyda Matrudi and Hanafi *madhab*.

Former students of Al-Azhar have elaborated on this, stating: "We, who have studied in Egypt, adhere to the true Hanafi *madhab*. We do not grow a beard, we do not wear long white dresses. Allah Almighty does not demand this from his slaves: 'grow a beard, dress like this'. It is all about purity, behavior, thoughts and everyone should carry it in their hearts. We are all immediately recognized by appearance and it is clear that we have studied in Egypt."<sup>25</sup>

In Egypt, religious education enjoys special attention. Accordingly, it is not subordinate to the Ministry of Education but controlled by the Supreme Council of Al-Azhar University directly subordinate to the Prime Minister. Mars Ibraev elaborates: "At this university, the first question to the student is: what kind of *madhab* does the country adhere to because any religious education is built taking into account the bases of the *madhabs*. They are not forced to adhere to a certain *madhab*. If a student professes Salafism, and does not recognize any *madhab*, he will not be accepted into this educational institution. In this case, they will say to him: "Sorry, you cannot study here."

Mars Ibraev went to the University of Al-Azhar of Egypt in December 1992 with a group of Kyrgyz students. Before beginning studies at the university, he first had to take preparatory

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<sup>25</sup> From the informal conversation of theologians, who studied in Egypt.

courses, studying for a total of seven years in Egypt. During an interview with the Bulan Institute he elaborated: "if you are fluent in the language and you have an understanding of religious concepts, the study will take 4-5 years. In addition to religious education, 45-55% of subjects constitute secular subjects such as philosophy, psychology, history, languages, mathematics, geography and others. In the lesson of religion, we studied the classical Quran, *hadith*, the fundamentals of Sharia, Islamic law, and dogma." The educational system of Al-Azhar University is similar to the American education system, where there is no system of passing credits. Ibraev continues: "You have to take exams in 16 subjects and if you do not pass them all, you will not go to the next course. At the Faculty of Theology, I studied the foundations of the Islamic religion, the cornerstone issues of Islam - *tafsir*, *hadith* and Islamic philosophy."

Deputy Chairman of the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan Zamir *kary* Rakiyev also received his education in Egypt, being accepted to the University of Al-Azhar in 2004. He notes that out that not only religious but also secular education is given there. Rakiyev stated: "First I finished courses of studying the Koran at the Central Mosque of Bishkek. Then in 2004, I went to study in Egypt. I had basic education, so if we add the language course, in total I had 8 years of study. Without basic knowledge, one needs to study 12 years there. Al-Azhar University is the same higher educational institution as any other; secular disciplines are taught here alongside religious disciplines. It is one of the most authoritative and ancient Islamic universities in the world. Unlike other educational institutions, the fundamentals of Islam are taught at the highest level."

While studying abroad, some students can be exposed to the negative influence of various religious movements. Deputy mufti Zamir Rakiyev does not deny the possibility of some of the graduates of this educational institution turning towards radical religious doctrines, as the human factor can never be ruled out. "A person who does not have sufficient Islamic education can become easy prey for such agitators. On the other hand, there are also those at Al-Azhar University, who did not come to study diligently but wanted to see the world as a tourist. They work as guides and translators at the resorts of Egypt. That happens. When you ask them: "Why are you here?", they reply: "why not?"

In an interview with the Bulan Institute, Akylbek Tagaev, a student at the University of Al-Azhar, mentioned that there are about 500 Kyrgyz citizens studying at universities in Egypt today. Tagaev has been in the Egyptian capital for nine years and is studying at the faculty of Sharia. In Cairo with him is his family including four children. The Spiritual Board of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan appointed him the coordinator of the Kyrgyz student community in Egypt. "Most people come here to study because they were advised by friends or family members. In Egypt, there is no diplomatic representation of Kyrgyzstan, so it is difficult to say how many exactly of our students are here. Approximately their number is around five hundred. Previously, the administration of the university annually recruited up to 10 students from other countries. That was also the case with us. However, two years ago this program ceased to operate."

### **3.3. Turkey - Strong theological faculties**

In the religious sphere of Kyrgyzstan, it is also considered prestigious to obtain a religious education in Turkey. This country is famous for the fact that religious education can be obtained officially at theological faculties of universities, for its religious neutrality, and for the interaction of religious disciplines with secular subjects. There is a special agreement

between the state bodies of Kyrgyzstan and Turkey, with official trips for religious study usually being to Turkey.

The overwhelming majority of graduates of the theological faculty of Osh State University (OSU)<sup>26</sup> continue their education in Turkish universities within the framework of an intergovernmental program between universities set by the initiative of the Turkish "*Dianet Vakfa*" foundation.<sup>27</sup> Most of these students studied political science, sociology, and theology in Turkey, but did not receive an explicit religious education. Turkish universities are considered very different from those in Egypt and Jordan where the main emphasis is on teaching the basics of Islam and Sharia in classical Arabic.

An example of this is the current Dean of the Faculty of Theology of OSU Sayfulla Bazarkulov. After graduating from the theological faculty of OSU, he continued his education at the Master's level at the Institute of Social Sciences at the University of Ankara, where he also defended his doctoral thesis.<sup>28</sup>

In part due to an agreement between the theological faculty of OSU and the University of Ankara, more than 500 OSU graduates have pursued further education in Turkey. According to Zainabidin Azhymatov, rector of the OSU theological faculty, OSU students study in Turkey for two years. The Ministry of Education has also concluded a formal agreement with Turkey and sends students there. "I studied my Master's and Doctorate in Turkey, I got a diploma there. The state diplomas of Turkey are recognized in our Kyrgyzstan. Since they are state educational institutions, they also adhere to certain educational standards. Religious education is provided based on those standards. A program has been drawn to meet modern requirements." says Zainabidin Azhymatov. At present, students of the Arashan Humanitarian Institute under OSU also go to Turkey to study within the framework of the agreement.

One of the more renowned young Kyrgyz theologians Abai Kenzhekulov is currently doing his doctoral studies at the University of Istanbul with a specialization in the sociology of religion. He elaborates on the Turkish education system: "Culture of religion is an obligatory discipline taught in ordinary Turkish schools. Among Muslim countries and countries of the Middle East, Turkey has the most well-ordered practice of teaching religious disciplines. Religious education in Turkey can be provided only by special organs. This is the Department of Religious Affairs of Turkey (*Dianet Vakf*) and higher education institutions. It should be noted that *Dianet Vakf* is a state institution. The knowledge that is given in higher education institutions is considered not entirely religious, but only related to the theological faculty."

The well-known theologian and political scientist Iskender Ormonov also received his education in Turkey. In 1992, he went to the city of Mersin and studied at the lyceum of the religious movement "Imam Khatyb". He remembers: "We studied the Turkish language for a year. In the second year, during the preparatory course, we received general information on religion. Afterwards, I decided to continue my education in the same direction, but at a higher educational institution to get a document. I participated in the competition for foreigners and chose theology out of 12 faculties. Thus, I became a student of the theological faculty of the University of Ankara. I also learned Arabic. Then I applied to the department of international relations of the faculty of political science and received my Master's degree."

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<sup>26</sup> Theological faculty of the Osh State University, [http://www.oshsu.kg/univer/?lg=1&id\\_parent=698](http://www.oshsu.kg/univer/?lg=1&id_parent=698)

<sup>27</sup> Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, <https://www.tdv.org/>

<sup>28</sup> Ankara University, <https://www.ankara.edu.tr/>

Iskender Ormonov considers the quality of Turkish religious education to be strong. He pointed out that at the theological faculties subjects were taught by professors from Europe and the United States. He goes on: "Theological faculties are in all universities in Turkey. There used to be about 100 theological faculties. Now, together with private educational institutions, this figure is approaching 200. Theological faculties in large cities like Ankara, Marmara, Izmir, Bursa are considered the most prestigious. Each university has its own brand. Ankara, for example, is considered to be a city of politicians, bureaucrats, students and scientists. Only professors who defended their doctoral degrees in Europe and the USA teach subjects at these universities."

Well-known theologian Ulan Usupov mentioned how Islamic universities lure Kyrgyz students. "When I was not able to enter Issyk-Kul State University, I was asked to submit documents to the theological faculty of OSU. At first, I was happy about the opportunity to go study in Turkey in the future, but at that time I had no idea about the Islamic religion. If at that time someone had told me that I would study the basics of Islam, I would hardly have believed them. I was tempted by the fact that in Turkey there is an opportunity to get a specialty in political science. Since this was an opportunity to get an education and see the world, I agreed," says Ulan Usupov.

In 1993, between OSU and Diyanet, an agreement was signed on the annual exchange of 40 young men and 20 women to higher educational institutions of Turkey. Usupov elaborates: "The first agreement was designed for 10 years, then it was extended several times. I was in the first group of Kyrgyz students sent to Turkey. At first, they were sent for two years, then it was reduced to a year. I studied for two years in Turkish universities. First, it was at the University of Bolu, then in Ankara. In the first year, along with Turkish language, I studied the basics of Islam. But, there were big problems with learning the language."

A Kyrgyz *jigit* named Ulukbek is currently studying in the city of Bursa in the graduate school of Uludag University. He studies at the department of Islamic history and development and, as this is his last year, is writing a thesis on the topic "Development and activities of Salafism in Kyrgyzstan". He states, "I first arrived in Turkey through the association "Turkish World" as a grant-holder of the Ministry of Education of Turkey, but currently I continue my education on my own. Turkey teaches religion by combining it with secular education. The quality of education can leave behind many Western countries. For example, theology classes are conducted by professors from Europe and the United States. The reason for my choice is that in Kyrgyzstan Turkish diplomas are recognized, while diplomas received in the Arab countries or in Pakistan are not." Today, at Uludag University where Ulugbek studies, there are 43 other Kyrgyz students.

### **3.4. Jordan - Islamic education on the British model**

Among theologians and experts, there are also those who emphasize the quality of Islamic religious education in Jordan. Even in the times of the Soviet Union, there were those who studied in Jordan, such as Kimsanbai *azhy* Abdrakhmanov. To this day there are those among the Kyrgyz youth who prefer Jordanian educations. Currently, a Kyrgyz citizen named Ilyaz is working as an imam in one of the largest mosques in Amman, the capital of Jordan. His mother periodically publishes videos on Facebook, where her son reads the *surahs* from the Koran, or makes Friday *namaz* (prayers), in his mosque. She also exhibits photos of her son in a white, long garment. Ilyaz is in his early 30s. The Bulan Institute tried to contact Ilyaz and

his mother, but all attempts failed. According to fellow Kyrgyz Abdunasir Abdisamatov, who is currently receiving his education there, it's not easy to become imam in a mosque in Jordan. "Ilyaz is a very polite, decent, modest *jigit*. He studied for a bachelor at the Islamic University. We should be calling Ilyaz *kaari*, since he knows the Holy Qur'an by heart. Also, God gave him such a magical voice, when he reads the Qur'an, a shiver runs through one's body. That's why, having such excellent qualities, he works as an imam," says Abdunasir. On the question in the social media to his mother, asking if he is Kyrgyz, mother jokingly replied: "yes, he is, he is from Naryn."

At present, Abdunasir Abdisamatov is studying in Amman at the University of Jordan. According to his knowledge, more than 40 Kyrgyz citizens are being educated in Jordan today, though the exact number is difficult to determine. "We gather during the *ayat*, or Friday prayer. Sometimes we play football together. We help each other, and are very friendly," says Abdunasir. Both his father and mother were educated in Jordan. "My choice of university was influenced by my parents because both of them once studied here. My mother is the first Kyrgyz woman to receive a bachelor's degree in Jordan. Currently, parents are in Kyrgyzstan, and are both unemployed, because of various circumstances. Thanks to the Almighty, my sister also studied in Jordan and received a diploma. Now my brother is studying here as well."<sup>29</sup>

Among famous theologians who studied in Jordan is the former mufti of Kyrgyzstan, Kimsanbai *azhy* Abdurakhmanov. As he told the Bulan Institute, even in Soviet times, he graduated from the Islamic madrasa Mir-i Arab in the city of Bukhara in Uzbekistan. Then in 1976-1980, he entered the faculty of Sharia at the University of Jordan, successfully graduating from it and receiving a diploma from the hands of the King of Jordan, saying that he is an expert on Islamic Sharia. Abdurakhmanov notes, "Jordan has a rich history in the teaching of Islam. In this country the system of religious education is very developed, it teaches Islam without impurities, in its pure form. Also in regards to scientific research, Jordan is ahead of many other Arab countries."<sup>30</sup>

The well-known theologian Kadyr Malikov also received his education in Jordan. He, in turn, recommends the Jordanian system to others. "Higher educational institutions in Jordan are very strong, the education system there is similar to the British one. If you study badly, no one will babysit you, and you will be expelled. For those, interested in getting religious education abroad, I would suggest the universities of Jordan."<sup>31</sup>

Kadyr Malikov started studying Islamic jurisprudence at the Faculty of Sharia, at the University of Jordan in 2001. "At the Faculty of Islamic Law of the University of Jordan, subjects are taught only by professors who have authority in the Muslim world and have doctorates. Education is free. In practical classes, students are taught to think freely, participate in discussions, argue and convince by evidence. By the way, the first mufti of Kyrgyzstan, Kimsanbai *azhy* studied at this faculty. Higher educational institutions in Syria, Iraq and Jordan are recognized as one of the strongest in the Muslim world," Kadyr Malikov believes.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Bulan Institute's interview with Abdunasir Abdisamat, November 27, 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Bulan Institute's interview with Kimsanbai *azhy* Abdurakhmanov, September 20, 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Bulan Institute's interview with Kadyr Malikov, September 20, 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Bulan Institute's interview with Kadyr Malikov, September 20, 2017.

Malikoc continues: "Upon arrival in Jordan, I first studied Arabic for a year at the preparatory course, and afterwards began my main education. Upon completion of the university, I received a state diploma with the specialty "Islamic jurisprudence", which is appreciated in many countries of the world. A record with ratings in accordance with the British system was also attached to the diploma. In addition to religious knowledge, we were taught subjects such as law, international relations, foreign languages, political philosophy, the foundations of democracy, macro and microeconomics, constitutional law, history, military affairs, and the penal system of Muslim criminal law. Regarding world religions, attention was paid to the study of Christianity and Judaism. When talking about the concept of secularism in Arab countries, they have a completely different meaning. When we say "secular", we mean an atheist view."<sup>33</sup> After studying at the University of Jordan, Kadyr Malikov completed courses in Spain in the Universidad Complutense de Madrid University<sup>34</sup>, specializing in Conflict Management and Security in the Asia-Pacific and Central Asian regions.

### **3.5. Saudi Arabia – Free luxury education at a price**

According to the specialists of the State Commission for Religious Affairs, many Kyrgyz citizens who want to study in Saudi Arabia have shown special interest in Umm al-Qura University.<sup>35</sup> "Religious education in Saudi Arabia is based on the ideology of Salafism, therefore certain interpretations of concepts in the Islamic religion do not correspond with traditional Islam in Kyrgyzstan," says Esengeldi Zhumakunov, a member of the State Commission for Religious Affairs.

The University of Umm al-Qura in the city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia was founded in 1949 as a Sharia college. This was the very first educational institution in the country. In 1981, by the King's decree, several colleges were united, on the basis of which the university was founded. Among the well-known theologians of Kyrgyzstan, the ex-mufti of Kyrgyzstan, Chubak *azhy* Zhalilov, graduated from this educational institution in Saudi Arabia. Musa Zholdoshov, *Qazi* of Batken region also received a bachelor's degree in Saudi Arabia, after studying in 2006-2010 at the Islamic University of Medina.

For students studying in Saudi Arabia, all living requirements are met and exceeded. Free dormitories and meals are provided and even paid air tickets so that students can fly to Kyrgyzstan during the holidays. Single students receive grants of \$230, students with families up to \$800. Via social networks, the Bulan Institute contacted a Kyrgyz man named Usman, who is currently studying in Saudi Arabia at the Shariah faculty of the Islamic University in Medina. According to him, in the first year of teaching great importance is attached to learning the Arabic language. "The first year I studied at the Institute of Arabic language. It was easier for me because in my Osh madrasa I was already learning Arabic. At present, I study at the faculty of Sharia, or speaking in modern language, at the law faculty," Usman said.

When asked about the number of Kyrgyz students studying in Saudi Arabia, Usman could not give the exact answer; he heard, however, that 22 students arrived in the new school year. "It is difficult to name the exact figure. Mostly, these are Uzbeks living in the southern region of

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<sup>33</sup> Kadyr Malikov currently works as the Director of the Independent Analytical Center "Religion, Law and Politics".

<sup>34</sup> Universidad Complutense de Madrid, <http://www.ucm.es/>

<sup>35</sup> Umm al-Qura University, <https://uqu.edu.sa/english>

the country, there are also ethnic Dungans. In recent years, interest in Saudi Arabia has increased significantly. This is because the educational system is strong and you do not have any financial difficulties, the university creates ideal conditions so that you need only think about studying. You never have to think about everyday problems. Institutions of Saudi Arabia, first of all, require one to master the Arabic language. The emphasis on mastering Arabic is very strong. There are also those who come from Kyrgyzstan to learn the Arabic language, open a business, or leave for another country.

Raheem, who also studies in Saudi Arabia, admits that in Saudi educational institutions emphasis is placed on Salafism. "Here we teach all four madhabs (schools of Islamic jurisprudence) to the same extent. But, when we proceed to the issue of *akydy* (belief), the emphasis is on the Salafi *akyd*. But, they do not teach terrorism here. On the contrary, Saudi Arabia is the country that fights the most against terrorism. Therefore, our training here does not carry any threat to Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyz students here separately receive knowledge on the Hanafi *madhab* from the Hanafi theologians. God willing, we too will return to our homeland and will serve the country as Chubak *azhy* did."

The *qazi* of the Batken region Musa Zholdoshev spent four years studying at the faculty of Sharia of the Islamic University in the city of Medina. Before that, he graduated from the Islamic Institute in Bishkek. According to him, when he went to study, he registered with the State Commission for Religious Affairs. There were other Kyrgyz students, studying with him in Saudi Arabia in those years, but he can't recall the exact number. He goes on: "During searches on the Internet, my attention was drawn to this University in particular. This higher educational institution is considered authoritative and fully funded by the state. The city of Medina is the second holy city after Mecca. As the conditions of study at the Islamic University of Medina completely suited me, I decided to go there. Before going, I registered with the State Commission for Religious Affairs and then started my journey. Education in Saudi Arabia is free, hostels and meals are free of charge, you are provided with a scholarship, and they even buy your air tickets. Every year you can go home." He explains his decision studying abroad because in 2006 there were very few strong teachers in religious educational institutions in Kyrgyzstan.

Ex-mufti Chubak *azhy* Zhalilov also studied in Saudi Arabia. He began his studies in 2000 and studied for six years in Mecca. The first two years he studied Arabic, then graduated from the Faculty of Muslim *Fiqh* (jurisprudence). According to Chubak *azhy*, each country has its own education characteristics: "Each country has its own peculiarities in the sphere of religious education. In Saudi Arabia, there is an emphasis on Salafism, in Egypt they are trained in the direction of *Ash'ari*. Before you go abroad, you need to study at home, learn about Islam, and only then go abroad. Before going to the University in Mecca, I taught classes at the Faculty of Oriental Studies of the National University and already had a diploma from the Islamic University in Bishkek. There our citizens study the Islamic of the Hanafi school. I saw how young guys with no appropriate basic knowledge got involved in various dubious religious movements because they lacked basic knowledge and went abroad unprepared,"

Since the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a theocratic state, Shariah has a significant impact on all sectors of the country's life, and is reflected in ideology, laws, management, and education. Naturally, the Islamic religion has a significant impact on the country's education system.

Today in Saudi Arabia there are 28 higher educational institutions, 24 thousand schools and various colleges, with Islamic studies being the basis of the educational program of each educational institution. Leading universities, acknowledged as innovative, are the following: Umm al-Qura University, Imam Mohammed bin Saud Islamic University, King Saud University, King Abdulaziz University, al-Qasim University and Jeddah University.

### 3.6. Pakistan - Registered and unregistered Madrasas

In Pakistan, there are about two million students studying in madrasas. Of these, 200'000 are of particular concern as they are believed to undergo military training in addition to religious education in extremist madrasas.<sup>36</sup> According to statistics for 2013, the total number of madrasas in Pakistan exceeds 13'000 and the number of students in these madrasas reaches at least 1'759'000.<sup>37</sup> However, according to some experts, if you include schools run by mosques, the number of madrasas in Pakistan is over 80,000. One-third of school-age children in the country are enrolled in them.<sup>38</sup>

The vast majority of religious schools in Pakistan are madrasas belonging to the Tablighi Jamaat, Ahl-Al-Azhar Hadith, and other various groups. In the province of Punjab, there are madrasas, mosques, printing houses and political organizations related to the Ahmad Khadis Jamaat. In the madrasa "Markaz-i Dava-Al-Azhar-Irshad" in the city of Muridka, along with religious instruction, students are taught to engage in politics, trade and military activities. Deobandi madrasas are freely distributed across Pakistan.<sup>39</sup> The Deobandi is the most powerful and large *jamaat* of Pakistan, which controls thousands of mosques and madrasas. The organization currently has 1176 madrasas in Punjab, 687 in Sind, and 624 in Baluchistan.

At present, Pakistani authorities are concerned about the sharp increase in the number of madrasas and their connections to various religious movements. Therefore, the process of reforming religious educational institutions is underway. For security purposes, it is currently prohibited to issue student visas to foreigners to study in Pakistani religious educational institutions. This is the reason why Kyrgyz citizens are currently restricted from obtaining religious education in Pakistan. In the above-mentioned State Commission on Religious Affairs statistics, it is possible to see how dramatically the number of Kyrgyz citizens studying in Pakistan has declined in recent years.

The Mufti of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan Maksatbek *azhy* Toktomushev graduated from "Arabia Ravand Madrasa" in Pakistan, where he studied in 1996-2005. Unfortunately, our attempt to talk personally with him about the knowledge gained there was not successful. Besides him, other well-known Kyrgyz *qazi* and imams studied in Pakistan. The *qazi* of Bishkek Sadridin Majitov, graduated from the Islamic University of Abu Huraira in Pakistan. Some members of the Ulema Council and Muftiate have also received religious education in Pakistan. These include Zhigitali *azhy* Ismailov who graduated from the Daarul-Ulum University and Kabylybek *azhy* Akmatov who graduated from the "Arabia Rayvand Madrasa".

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<sup>36</sup> Ipatov A., "Religious education in Pakistan", [http://religio.rhga.ru/upload/iblock/f1f/21\)%20%D0%90.%20%D0%98%D0%BF%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%BE%D0%B2.pdf](http://religio.rhga.ru/upload/iblock/f1f/21)%20%D0%90.%20%D0%98%D0%BF%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%BE%D0%B2.pdf)

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> For more information on Deobandi madrasahs in Pakistan, see: "Beyond Politics: the Reality of a Deobandi Madrasa in Pakistan", Journal of Islamic Studies, Volume 18, 1 January, 2007.

Maksat, a current Kyrgyz resident who spent nine years studying in Pakistan, today lives and works in the Chui region. The 45-year-old left in 2006, studied at madrasa "Arabia Ravand" and returned home in 2014. Prior to his departure for Pakistan, he received a basic religious education at the Imam Azam madrasa in the village of Kara-Dobo, Kadamzhai district. He did not register at the State Commission for Religious Affairs and went to Pakistan independently on a tourist visa. "My older comrades helped me, contacted the school and organized everything. I went to Pakistan on my own, in order to get religious education there. " Today he teaches at a madrasa and works as an imam in one of the mosques in Chui oblast.

"I had to study the Arabic language through Urdu, since Urdu was spoken where I studied. The study of the Arabic language took me a year. Two years were spent on memorizing the Koran. After passing the exam I went straight to the second course, " says Maksat. "At first, it was very difficult and I could not get used to it, there were days when I wanted to return. But, now I don't regret it, because that's where I became a full person. A scholarship was not paid in Pakistan but there are local sponsors who fully provide for all the needs of the madrasa and never denied us with anything. Free housing was provided, with three meals a day free of charge, and all necessary conditions were created for studying."

The *qazi* of Bishkek, Sadriddin Majitov, graduated from the Islamic University named after Abu Huraira in the state of Quetta in Pakistan. Before that, he studied at the Islamic Institute in Bishkek. In 2000, he spent four months in *daawah* (preaching) in India and Pakistan before his studies. "In 1996 during the administration of (then President) Akaev, at the suggestion of the president and the council of the ulama, our grandfather was elected as a Mufti. Majit *mullah* Abdusatar is my grandfather. We studied *in hujra* under the guidance of this person. In Fergana we studied *in hujra* under *mullah* Shakir. In the times of the Soviet Union, there were no madrasas, so we had to study secretly in mullahs' houses. Study in such times and conditions is called *hujra*," explains Sadriddin Majitov.

He also did not register with the State Commission for Religious Affairs or the Muftiate. He also went independently on a tourist visa. "When we were there doing *daawah*, we inquired, whether there was an educational institution conforming with Hanafi *madhab* and found this university. In Pakistan, I studied in Farsi. Because in Quetta there are no Urdu. The 16 million residents of this area speak the Baluch language. Meals, accommodation, tuition - all this was on the account of the madrasas, although there was no scholarship. In 2003, I completed the nine-year education ahead of schedule, because my level of knowledge was high enough and I was immediately transferred to the sixth year."

Madrasas of Pakistan are often criticized because of the strong influence of various dubious religious movements on them. Also of concern is the huge number of madrasas, the lack of registration, the affiliation to various religious movements such as the Taliban, Tablighi Jamaat or Salafism. There are also those who criticize the madrasa "Arabia Ravand" in Pakistan, the one that the Mufti of Kyrgyzstan Maksatbek *azhy* Toktomushev graduated from. Orozbek Moldaliev notes, "the madrasa that our mufti graduated from, is not recognized as a state educational institution in Pakistan. Such educational institutions cannot be offered to our citizens."<sup>40</sup>

In regards to doubts concerning the educational institutions of Pakistan, the *qazi* of the city of Bishkek said: "In fact, there are too many madrasas in Pakistan. Some of them are registered,

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<sup>40</sup> Bulan Institute's interview with Orozbek Moldaliev, November 16, 2017.

others are not. Some teach in the spirit of extremism, some belong to the Taliban, some adhere to Salafism. Salafism prevails in Islam. And some children are brought up in a completely different direction. For example, in Pakistan, it is claimed that 99% adhere to the Hanafi *madhab*, but a huge country with 145 million people has a huge mass of unregistered private madrasas. We saw these with our own eyes."<sup>41</sup>

### **3.7. Other countries: Kyrgyz citizens in the madrasas of Syria, Malaysia, India, and Bangladesh**

Before the start of the civil war in Syria, many Kyrgyz youths studied at universities and madrasas in Syria. Since the conflict, most of them either returned home or transferred to other educational institutions in the Middle East. One of them is a specialist at the Department of Fatwa and Mosques of the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan, Baktiyar Toktogaziev.

Baktiyar chose Syria on the advice of acquaintances, and in 2003 went to Damascus to study at the academy of the famous theologian Ahmad Kuftaro,<sup>42</sup> He recounts: "For a year I studied at the language courses, then I was educated at the institute for foreign students. From all the faculties, I chose the Fatkhul Islami faculty because it adhered to the Hanafi *madhab*. For my last year, according to the rules, I was supposed to continue my studies at Al-Azhar University, but for objective reasons, I could not go there. Therefore, in order to graduate, I went to the University of Tripoli.<sup>43</sup> In total, I studied for five years in Syria, then another year at the University of Tripoli."

Islamic institutions of Malaysia also offer a good theoretical educational destination. The Spiritual Board of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan confirmed that in Malaysia education is conducted in accordance with the Hanafi *madhab* and educational quality is high. The State Commission on Religious Affairs also believes that the International Islamic University of Malaysia is one of the most prestigious religious educational institutions in the world. Unfortunately, so far there are no formal agreements between the educational institutions of Kyrgyzstan and Malaysia.

Today, there are also those who travel from Kyrgyzstan to Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and India, often with their families, in order to conduct *daawah* and take 3-4 month religious courses. Usually, they gather in groups of 15-20 people and travel together. A young woman named Nazira, told the Bulan Institute about one of her close relatives who studied at such religious course in India. According to her, a group of 20 people flew out of the airport. She goes on: "Everyone was dressed in a Muslim style, but I was shocked by the way Kyrgyz women were dressed - they were all black from head to foot, even the faces covered, with only eyes visible. All of them were Kyrgyz. My distant cousin also went to India. All of those four months, they only study at those religious courses, without going anywhere."

Zaynabidin Azhymatov, a lecturer at the Faculty of Theology of OSU also notes increased interest in the Indian sub-continent: "As far as I know, today, there are more people going on the four-months *daawah* to India and Bangladesh. I personally did not go to India or

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<sup>41</sup> Bulan Institute's interview with *qazi* of Bishkek, Sadriddin Majitov, November 21, 2017.

<sup>42</sup> Ahmad Kuftaro, ex-Mufti of Syria, died in 2004, aged 88. During the life of the famous theologian, a Sheikh Ahmad Kuftaro Foundation was established; the foundation is actively engaged in teaching Muslims. The Sheikh Akhmat Kaftaro Foundation official website: <http://www.kuftaro.net/english>

<sup>43</sup> University of Tripoli, Lebanon, <http://www.ut.edu.lb/>

Bangladesh, but I heard from others that Kyrgyz students study there. It turns out, there are even more of them in Bangladesh."

Bangladesh is currently one of the most undeveloped countries in Asia. Even though the territory of Bangladesh is smaller than Kyrgyzstan, there are 163 million people living there. In Bangladesh, there are over 10,000 madrasas, opened by private individuals.

In 2012, it became known that a group of school-aged children from the Djungal district of Naryn oblast was sent to Bangladesh, as mass media wrote about the incident in detail.<sup>44</sup> It was already known that religiously minded parents would go for months for *daawah* in Bangladesh, taking their children with them, and leaving them there afterwards for training at local madrasas. There, in the so-called Djami-madrasas, their education can be fueled with ideas of the "Tablighi Jamaat" and Taliban.<sup>45</sup>

A man named Kamil, who witnessed how school-aged children study in Bangladesh, told the Bulan Institute the following: "There is a center of *Daawahtists*, located in the region of Kakrail Dhaki. That's where the Kyrgyz flock. Kyrgyz people go with families to *daawah* or religious courses for 4-5 months. Some of them, specifically take their children in order to leave them there afterwards, so that they can receive religious knowledge. When I came, over 40 Kyrgyz children studied there. There were 9-10 year-olds among them. Almost all were children of Kyrgyz *daawahtists*. They were left there by their parents. In fact, not many know that there are Kyrgyz who study in Bangladesh. I saw everything with my own eyes, and I was very surprised."

Ex-mufti Chubak *azhy* Zhalilov also told the Institute that he has information on Kyrgyz people going to Bangladesh. "I heard that young people are leaving for Bangladesh. I have been to Bangladesh, but there are no Islamic universities there. There are only madrasas for secondary education. Kyrgyz going to Bangladesh go there independently, on tourist visas. We learn about this only after the fact upon their return. The Muftiate does not study this problem and does not have complete information on it. In general, it would be good if religious education is carried out based on agreements concluded by the state bodies such as the Muftiate."

Chairman of the State Commission on Religious Affairs Zayirbek Ergeshov also confirmed the departure of children to Bangladesh for religious education: "We have information about the *Daawahtists* going to Bangladesh. Parents go there with their families on tourist visas. Traveling and going abroad as a tourist is, after all, the right of every citizen. As it turns out, however, there are also those who leave their children behind, in the madrasas. Upon their return, no one has the right to demand an answer from the parents about where their children are. We have, therefore, started work with law enforcement agencies in this direction."

In 2013, Kanybek Osmonaliev, the deputy of Jogorku Kenesh (Parliament), drafted a law initiating a ban on children under 18 to leave the country in order to receive religious educations abroad. At that time, incidents of school-aged children from Djungal district being sent to the madrasas in Bangladesh and Syria had just been made public. Having considered the bill, the Parliamentary Committee approved it; however, it was not supported at the session of the Jogorku Kenesh. Parents going to *daawah* in Bangladesh and India can still

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<sup>44</sup> "What can our teens learn in Bangladesh?", <https://kloop.kg/blog/2013/08/19/azatty-k-chemu-nashipodrostki-mogut-nauchit-sya-v-bangladesh/>

<sup>45</sup> Radio Azattik, "Kyrgyz students of mysterious madrasas in Bangladesh", August 26, 2013, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kyrgyzstan-bangladesh-medrese/25086376.html>

leave their children there. This phenomenon of first noticed in 2013 has not stopped to this day. There remains pressure to address this, however. Tabyldy Orozaliyev, the ex-deputy director of the State Commission says: "Children must first get knowledge in their homeland, absorb the culture of their country, learn their language and history, and only then get an education abroad."<sup>46</sup>

In Kyrgyzstan, there were also proposals to completely ban travel for the purpose of *daawah*. The ban, however, does not solve the problem. In 2014, the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan adopted a new statute on *daawah*. Ex-Director of the State Commission for Religious Affairs Orozbek Moldaliev elaborates: "Back then we approved the rules that *daawah* may only be held inside mosques, that *Daawahists* be literate in terms of religious knowledge, and that they may only wear national clothes. The Muftiate opened four centers for training for the *Daawahists*. However, there was no benefit from the ban, as it is an unregistered organization, there are no lists of participants, so who will obey the ban? For this reason, according to the decision of the Defense Council of 2014, we decided to use them for the spread of the *maturidi aqidah* (faith) of the Hanafi *madhab*. Those who have studied in these four centers now conduct *daawah* based on the Hanafi *madhab*. The Hanafi *madhab* of Islam supports peace. There is however a growing number of followers of other traditions who do not obey and independently go out to do *daawah*."<sup>47</sup>

#### 4. Obtaining Religious Education Abroad: Current State Policy

##### 4.1. The role of education in Islam and the tradition of studying abroad in the pursuit of knowledge

The religion of Islam, the second largest of the world religions and one of the Abrahamic religions, strives for science and knowledge as a central goal. In the Qur'an, the holy book of Muslims sent down to the prophet Muhammad, the *ayah* begins with the word "read": "Read in the name of your Lord, who created all things. He created man from a blood clot. Read, because your Lord is the most generous. He taught by means of a writing stick — he taught a man what he did not know."<sup>48</sup> Regarding knowledge, Allah said: "Allah upraises in degrees those of you who believe, and those of you who obtain knowledge."<sup>49</sup> The dictum of the prophet Muhammad says: "The pursuit of knowledge is the responsibility of every Muslim man and woman."<sup>50</sup> Based on its own holy book and teaching, Islam is a religion that supports science and knowledge and encourages the pursuit of knowledge.

Starting from the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Hanafi *madhab*, a jurisprudential tradition open to the pursuit of knowledge, began to spread on the territory of Central Asia, including Kyrgyzstan. As a result, numerous outstanding personalities and scientists found homes in the region, many of whom contributed immensely to the development of Islamic culture and development in the region. Despite long distances, striving to gain more knowledge, scholars of Islam rushed towards developing cities that were centers of science and culture. As a result,

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<sup>46</sup> Informational Agency "24kg", "Citizens of Kyrgyzstan will not be able to receive religious education abroad under 18 years old", <https://24.kg/archive/ru/parlament/153257grazhdane-kyrgyzstana-ne-smogut-poluchat.html/>

<sup>47</sup> Bulan Institute's interview with Orozbek Moldaliev, the former Director of the State Commission for Religious Affairs, November 10, 2017.

<sup>48</sup> Qur'an, Sura Al-Alak: 1-5.

<sup>49</sup> Qur'an, Sura Al-Muzhadal: 11.

<sup>50</sup> Sahih Ibn Maazha, Hadith №224.

although most scholars and theologians became famous in their homelands, there were also those who gained fame in the places where they received their knowledge. Their names remain in history, often related to the places they managed to best manifest themselves or wrote their greatest works. These names were given to them by their contemporaries. For example, in the Middle Ages, there was Ismail Bukhari, Tashkent's Imam Shashi, Sirazhudin Osh, Zhusup Balasaguniy and others. Mahmud Kashgari was born in Barskhan, but he took the name of the place, where he received his knowledge - the city of Kashgar. Also, the Uzgen Imam Serakhsiy became famous for the name of the city of Serakhs. Although coming from the city of Kokand, the theologian of the twentieth century Mohammed Rustam *uulu* was named Mohammed Hindustaniem or Dammullah Hindustaniem, because he was educated in India.<sup>51</sup> Looking through history, many eminent theologians were forced to travel, leaving their homelands behind and overcoming endless distances in the search of better religious knowledge and education.

#### 4.2. Current State Policy and Legislation

Following the independence of Kyrgyzstan, and with the help of donors from Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria, Turkey, Pakistan and other countries, there was unprecedented growth in the construction of mosques and the opening of Islamic schools. "At the same time, our fellow citizens who received their religious education abroad started returning to the country, bringing mentality, standards of conduct, clothing, traditions of those countries where they studied at with them. To a certain degree, religious radicalization in Kyrgyzstan is under the influence of foreign religious extremist centers and organizations."<sup>52</sup>

During the Soviet Union, religious education in Kyrgyzstan was limited to *hujra*, while higher Islamic religious education could be obtained only at cities in Uzbekistan such as Bukhara and Tashkent. 25 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union and independence of Kyrgyzstan, the state still has not been able to streamline the work of religious educational institutions and regulate religious education. This has led to several reasons why Kyrgyz citizens seek religious education in the Arab countries, Turkey, or Pakistan.

First is the poor quality of education in local religious institutions and their inability to meet modern requirements. The second is numerous foreign charitable foundations and private investors acting as intermediaries for obtaining an education in foreign universities. In countries such as Saudi Arabia or Egypt room and board is free and scholarships are often provided. Third, it is everyone's personal right to receive education wherever he or she prefers; moreover, there is a tradition in Islam for a person to travel the world in search of a wise, knowledgeable mentor in order to train with him. Fourth is that the process of educating citizens in foreign religious schools has been neglected over the past five years, not being controlled or regulated by either the Muftiate or the state.

An example is the academic year 2016-2017 when, according to the State Commission on Religious Affairs, currently 322 Kyrgyz citizens received religious education in foreign educational institutions.<sup>53</sup> Of these, 127 studied in Saudi Arabia, 87 in Turkey, 26 in Egypt,

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<sup>51</sup> Bulan Institute's interview with Zamira Tursunbekova, the expert at the State Commission for Religious Affairs.

<sup>52</sup> "The Concept of the state policy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the religious sphere for 2014-2020", approved on 14.11.2014 by decree of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic, <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/68294>

<sup>53</sup> We remind you that these are official numbers; no one can tell the exact number of those who left on tourist visas or personal invitations.

25 in Jordan, 24 in Russia, 9 in Pakistan and 6 in Kuwait. However, these are only official figures. Nobody can accurately name the exact number of people who left to study on tourist visas or via personal invitations. It is extremely likely that the number of Kyrgyz students studying abroad is much larger.

**Number of Kyrgyz citizens who received religious education abroad in recent years (official data)<sup>54</sup>**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Number of Kyrgyz students</b>
2012	Pakistan	147
	Saudi Arabia	133
	Egypt	287
	Kuwait	4
<b>Year</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Number of Kyrgyz students</b>
2013	Pakistan	153
	Saudi Arabia	133
	Egypt	314
	Kuwait	4
<b>Year</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Number of Kyrgyz Students</b>
2014	Pakistan	22
	Saudi Arabia	133
	Egypt	155
	Kuwait, Syria, Jordan	No exact information on these countries
	Turkey	84
<b>Year</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Number of Kyrgyz Students</b>
2015	Pakistan	24
	Saudi Arabia	81
	Egypt	287
	Kuwait	6
	Iran	13

The State Commission for Religious Affairs for the period of 2007-2012, according to its legislation, carried out only 119 agreements on issuing referrals for Kyrgyz citizens to study abroad. Of these, 118 were issued for training in Saudi Arabia and 1 in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. "The above figures do not indicate that they all came to us to register themselves. We compose statistics ourselves, we have our own methods of gathering the necessary data," said Zayrbek Ergeshov, head of the State Commission for Religious Affairs.<sup>55</sup>

According to the State Commission on Religious Affairs, the process of leaving abroad for studies without any registration and often on a tourist visa began on a large scale since 2012. "What worries us the most is the fact that going abroad for studies often violates of the normative legal acts of the Kyrgyz Republic," said Gulnaz Isayeva, a staff member of the State Commission on Religious Affairs.<sup>56</sup> We are also particularly worried about the fact that minor children aged 9-14 go to study in foreign educational institutions. These facts have

<sup>54</sup> Official data provided to Bulan Institute by the State Commission for Religious Affairs.

<sup>55</sup> Bulan Institute's interview with Zayirbek Ergeshov, November 25, 2017.

<sup>56</sup> Bulan Intitute's interview with Gulnaz Isayeva.

already been voiced by our media. As you know, there have been widely publicized cases when children of school age went to study in Kuwait and Bangladesh."<sup>57</sup>

Another acute problem is that many have very weak knowledge of the true values of Islam and are easily subjected to the influence of radical ideologies and therefore may contribute to the import of nontraditional and unconventional religious trends into our country. Because of these fears, neighboring Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have turned to radical measures: not only have they banned religious education in foreign educational institutions, but also demanded the return of their citizens who studying in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

Zayirbek Ergeshov notes that "Kyrgyzstan has not taken such a step. Radical measures will not solve the problem but only increase aggression. In the event of a ban, non-traditional religious trends will not cease but simply go underground and while confrontation with the authorities will only intensify. In addition, such harsh measures restrict the right of a person to freedom of religion and education, which contradicts democratic principles."<sup>58</sup>

Kyrgyzstan has chosen a different path and is now on the verge of strengthening its legislative base, introducing a number of changes and additions to current regulations. A bill has been proposed to introduce several changes into the law "On Freedom of Religion and Religious Organizations in the Kyrgyz Republic"; it has already been considered by two parliamentary committees. According to Ergeshov, the adoption of these changes will solve many existing problems.

State Commission expert Zamira Tursunbekova elaborates: "We want to introduce a norm into the law, that a citizen traveling abroad for studies must notify the State Commission about this. We need to know who goes where to study, we need to build a database. To date, neither the Ministry of Foreign Affairs nor the law enforcement agencies have the exact data. We would also want to introduce a norm that only upon obtaining a general secondary education (11 classes) or basic general education (9 classes) a person may receive religious education. Thus, according to the law, a person should not be allowed to study at madrasa, before completing the 9th grade. In addition, the border guards would not release a person who has not reached the age of 18 into a foreign country alone. However, it is also very important for a young person to first received a basic religious education and graduate from a madrasa in Kyrgyzstan before going on to study at foreign educational institutions. Prior to this, the norm only ordained the application for leaving the country for studies to be reviewed jointly with the State Commission on Religious Affairs."<sup>59</sup>

According to the statute of the State Commission on Religious Affairs, the applicant who plans to travel abroad to obtain religious education, must come to the State Commission, show his application, and together with the Commission decide on the country and the educational institution where he will study. However, this norm does not work in practice; the fact that not all of those going abroad to study were in sight of the State Commission was noted in the Concept signed by the President of the Kyrgyz Republic in 2014.

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<sup>57</sup> "What are children from Kyrgyzstan taught in Bangladesh?", RO / <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1407387420>

<sup>58</sup> Bulan Institute's interview with Zayirbek Ergeshov, the Director of the State Commission for Religious Affairs.

<sup>59</sup> Bulan Institute's interview with Zamira Tursunbekova, the expert of the State Commission for Religious Affairs.

In this regard, the 2014-2020 State Concept sets two main goals:

- Investigate religious institutions where Kyrgyz citizens study and conduct explanatory work among the population on whether these institutions are compatible with local conditions;
- In order to register all citizens of Kyrgyzstan studying in foreign religious educational institutions, develop appropriate interdepartmental mechanisms, carry out joint work with state bodies of foreign countries, and improve the provision of consultative and other assistance to Kyrgyz students abroad.

Unfortunately, in the years since independence, President A. Atambayev (2011-2017) was only the first head of state to pay attention to the quality of religious education. However, it is unclear if the norms proposed by the state to regulate the issue of receiving religious education abroad have had any appreciable effect.

Gulnaz Isayeva, the Head of the Center for Analytics of the State Commission on Religious Affairs notes that a citizen wishing to travel abroad to receive religious education has to come to the State Commission with a referral from a religious organization, provide information on where he is planning to study, and obtain a consent from the State Commission to do so. As mentioned earlier, however, citizens who go to study at religious institutions in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan or Egypt, do not notify either the SAMK or the State Commission about doing so. Many people go on either tourist visas or by invitation. Even approximate figures of how many citizens receive education in foreign religious institutions do not exist. The Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan was also unable to provide an exact figure. According to a specialist at the training department of the SAMK, Oromzali Adyanova, the Muftiate often receives requests for providing referrals but they no longer issue these documents.

Oromzali Adyanova elaborates: "Recently, there have been many of those who would like to study in Saudi Arabia. To study in that country, however, our citizens are required to provide a referral and supporting information. While they ask us to give them these documents, we refuse them. This is due to the fact that for the past three years we have suspended the sending of our citizens to study abroad. We do hear, however, that they still manage to get this supporting information from someone else, get translations in the translation centers and leave the country with them. Once again, I need to emphasize, that our organization has ceased issuing these documents. We do not provide permission and are not responsible for them. At the same time, we cannot take any measures against them. Therefore, it is difficult for us to name the exact number of students studying abroad."<sup>60</sup>

Until 2014, SAMK sent students to study in Kuwait, Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. For the past three years, however, the Muftiate has stopped giving permissions and officially sending people to study abroad. In his interview with Bulan Institute, the Head of Education Department of DUMK Akimzhan Ergeshov, explained that there are several reasons for that: "We decided to be safe and take this step because of the war in Syria and the situation in the Middle East in general. We also feared that our citizens, studying abroad, might fall under the influence of alien ideology. The lack of any agreements with the foreign religious educational institutions also contributed to this decision. Whatever country our citizens go to get a religious education, no one can guarantee the quality of education, good living conditions, health and safety."

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<sup>60</sup> Bulan Institute's interview with Oromzali Adyanov, November 12, 2017.

He noted, that for the past three years, the Muftiate has not sent anyone to study abroad. Ergeshov goes on: "There are those, however, who find their own ways to go abroad - they leave on a tourist visa and voluntarily stay and study abroad. Since it was not us, who sent them, we cannot take responsibility for them. There are also those, we sent to study before making the decision on stopping it, who are still studying abroad. We continue to maintain contacts with them. With our help, the councils were set, the heads of the councilors were appointed by us. Those students are in constant communication with us, they report on their studies and the kind of education they receive. We communicate with these students constantly."

In Kyrgyzstan, there is a law "On Education" but since the state and religion are legally divided, it does not have any application in regards to religious education. Most experts believe there is a need for a law regulating religious education in the country and abroad, as well as norms improving state control over the process. "We are waiting for the situation in the Middle East to improve. The Muftiate also intends to compile a list of recommended foreign educational institutions and sign cooperation agreements with them."<sup>61</sup>

#### **4.3. Restrictions to be introduced and a prime-list of institutions to be proposed**

As mentioned above, in order to establish some regularity in the process of Kyrgyz citizens studying at foreign religious institutions, the State Commission on Religious Affairs proposes to introduce certain norms into the law "On Freedom of Religion and Religious Organizations in the Kyrgyz Republic." The bill has already been considered in two profile committees and will soon be submitted to a session of parliament.<sup>62</sup>

In addition, the State Commission on Religious Affairs has developed a list of educational institutions that will be offered to those who want to receive religious education abroad. At present, it is planned to review this list together with SAMK and other relevant departments. After concluding a contract with the educational institution, the student will be obliged to come with all documents to the State Commission on Religious Affairs and register in the database. It will also be mandatory for a person wishing to travel abroad for studies to already have secondary general or religious education.

Below is the list of a dozen of foreign religious educational institutions, currently offered by the SAMK and the State Commission on Religious Affairs:<sup>63</sup>

1. Kazakh National University "Al Farabi";
2. Kazakh and Egyptian Islamic University "Nur";
3. Imam Bukhari Islamic Institute;
4. The Tajik Islamic Institute named after Imam Azam-Abuhanif Nu'mon ibn Sobit;
5. Russian Islamic Institute;
6. Kazan Islamic Institute;
7. Moscow Islamic Institute;
8. All state universities of Turkey with a faculty of Theology;

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<sup>61</sup> Bulan Institute's interview with Akimzhan *ajy* Ergeshov, November 22, 2017.

<sup>62</sup> Bulan Institute's interview with Gulnaz Isayeva, the Head of the Analytics Center of the State Commission for Religious Affairs.

<sup>63</sup> We remind you that this is still a project and has not yet been approved.

9. Malaysian International Islamic University;

10. University of Al-Azhar, Egypt.

According to the expert of the State Commission on Religious Affairs Esengeldi Zhumakunov, there are several reasons why these educational institutions were chosen. "We believe that during education, one should not confine oneself only to religious subjects, it is also necessary to obtain knowledge on modern humanitarian and social sciences. Secondly, we paid special attention to history, authority, and the quality of education of the chosen educational institutions. For example, the University of Al-Farabi in Kazakhstan also teaches philosophy of religion, sociology of religion, psychology of religion, etc."<sup>64</sup>

It will be necessary to enter into bilateral agreements with all the educational institutions on the list. According to the State Commission on Religious Affairs, the universities of Central Asia, the Russian Federation, Turkey, Egypt, and Malaysia will be offered as recommended educational institutions. At the same time, the State Commission believes that it is necessary to impose restrictions on obtaining religious education in certain countries. Zamira Tursunbekova cautions that "Such restrictions are needed for Saudi Arabia, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Republic of Iraq, Libya, the Republic of Yemen and the Syrian Arab Republic since they do not teach the traditional Islamic values accepted in Kyrgyzstan. Religious education received in these countries, leads to the disunity of the Muslim society in our state."<sup>65</sup>

Many Kyrgyz experts in the field of religion support these steps. The Dean of the Faculty of Theology of OSU Saifulla Buzarkulov believes that the compilation of the prime list will help those who wish to receive religious education abroad, not be mistaken in their choice of an educational institution. However, not everyone wants to be educated in Russia, Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan. According to experts, many believe that the real Islamic education can only be obtained in Arab countries.

"As the term 'democracy' is associated with the United States, so is the term 'Islamic education' associated with Arab countries."<sup>66</sup> Secondly, in order to obtain an education in Russia and Kazakhstan, one needs certain financial means. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and other similar countries offer free hostels, food, and often pay a scholarship. According to the former director of the State Commission on Religious Affairs Orozbek Moldoliev, many citizens go to Arab countries to learn the language, establish contacts with rich sheikhs and do business. He notes, "For them, Russia, Kazakhstan or Kazan are uninteresting, they are not considered as 'abroad'. They go to the Arab countries not for getting a religious education, but rather to do business and earn extra money."

When, in 2015, a meeting of students studying in Saudi Arabia was organized, many of them arrived in their own cars. "Their goal is to go to Egypt or Saudi Arabia to learn Arabic, establish contacts, set up a business and get rich, not get an education. It is especially good to earn money during pilgrimage, *ummah*".<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Bulan Institute's interview with Esengeldy Zhumakunov, Bulan TV, November 6, 2017.

<sup>65</sup> Bulan Institute's interview with Zamira Tursunbekova.

<sup>66</sup> Bulan Institute's interview with Zayirbek Ergeshov, the Director of the State Commission for Religious Affairs.

<sup>67</sup> Bulan Institutes' interview with Orozbek Moldaliev, November 10, 2017.

Some experts believe that Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and similar countries should not be automatically considered as only teaching extremism. "You cannot call everyone going to study abroad a terrorist. We should be changing stereotyped attitudes towards them. It would be much easier for them to study if they knew they could find jobs upon return to their homeland. Of course, if a person going abroad to study is in contact with a terrorist group, then that constitutes a threat to state security. If talking about illegal immigrants and future militants, then yes, they leave, subject to somebody's influence. For example, they go to the madrasas in Afghanistan and Pakistan. How do they leave the country? Firstly, on a tourist visa. With some countries, we have a visa-free regime. Also, in addition to the Internet, there must be someone helping in organizing it," says Indira Aslanova an expert on religion and a senior lecturer at the Department of Religious Studies of the Kyrgyz-Slavic University.

Indira Aslamova herself also studied a year in Egypt. She goes on: "If the religious institution in Saudi Arabia or another country is considered prestigious, there is no danger to our security. There are only certain differences in our worldviews, for example, when comparing *madhabs*, these are the ways of performing prayers, traditions and rituals. For example, the Hanbali *madhab* is widespread in Saudi Arabia. There, the deceased are buried on the same day they die. This stems from the local conditions - it's hot there. We also adhere to traditions and customs, based on our conditions."

Indira Aslamova believes that not all of those going abroad to study do so illegally and should not be condemned in any way. She notes: "It would be more correct to consider those who leave for religious education as an unaccounted, rather than an illegal stream. We must conclude bilateral agreements with the educational institutions so that there is more competition and our citizens can make the right choices".

According to Indira Aslanova, a scientist David Abramson conducted a study to determine how radicalized the students from Central Asia studying in Egypt become. David Abramson concludes: "If a person is well educated in matters of religion, the likelihood of his interest in radical groups is low. On the contrary, they get marginalized on the return to their homeland, because their foreign diploma is worthless, they cannot find a job, and they are labeled as educated in Arab countries."

#### **4.4. Is it necessary to control religious education received abroad? Opinions of theologians and experts**

The experts at the State Commission on Religious Affairs believe that the lack of control over religious education received abroad by young citizens could in the future turn into a significant problem for the country. Therefore, they are planning to introduce certain legislative changes. "Luring our youth with the opportunity to study at foreign religious institutions, the emissaries of international terrorist organizations take them out of the country via visas or personal invitations. Therefore, an urgent issue of the day is to establish control over religious education received abroad," said Zamir Tursunbekov, a specialist at the State Commission on Religious Affairs.

With the purpose of regulating the issue of obtaining religious education, a draft bill on introducing amendments and additions to the law "On Freedom of Religion and Religious Organizations in the Kyrgyz Republic" has been drafted. This draft bill stipulates norms that require those leaving abroad in order to receive religious education to already hold a general secondary or religious education and to notify the State Commission on Religious Affairs

about their admission to the educational institution. "This bill has already been considered in two parliamentary committees. Soon it will be submitted to the parliament for discussion. These norms should reduce the risk of our youth becoming involved in extremist ideologies while receiving religious education abroad," says Zayirbek Ergeshov. Despite these efforts, while the Muftiate and the State Commission on Religious Affairs are responsible for educating young people on the issues of their choice of foreign religious educational institutions there currently remains a shortage of corresponding legislative and regulatory frameworks.

As an example, one can consider the experience of the neighboring countries in the question of regulating this issue. In the countries of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, the state banned receiving religious education abroad and withdrew all its citizens from such educational institutions. Kazakhstan is also searching for ways of regulating the issue of its citizens studying in foreign religious institutions. The Ministry of Religious Affairs and Civil Society of Kazakhstan, together with the State Commission on Religious Affairs of this country, warns its citizens against leaving the country for the purposes of receiving religious education and forebodingly notes that those who received religious education without the appropriate direction of the Kazakh Spiritual Administration of Muslims will not be able to get a job in the management system".<sup>68</sup>

Abdyshukur *azhy* Narmatov, a well-known theologian and the head of the Ulema Council of the Muslims of Kyrgyzstan, studied in Egypt for seven years. He believes that all those leaving the country to receive religious education abroad should be supervised by the SAMK and the State Commission on Religious Affairs. "It is advisable, that a person first learns the heritage of his people, gets the basis of religious education, and only then goes to receive religious education in foreign countries. The education received abroad should correspond to the conditions of Kyrgyzstan. Those persons, who do not have such a foundation might easily fall prey to some kind of alien ideas," said Abdyshukur *azhy* Narmatov in an interview with Azattyk (Freedom) radio station.<sup>69</sup>

The head of the "Yyman" Foundation Nurzhigit Kadyrbekov considers it necessary to have legislative norms and effective structures to control the flow of people leaving to receive religious educations. "It turns out, many believe the Muftiate to be some monstrous and powerful structure controlling religion. As a matter of fact, however, the Muftiate is a non-governmental organization. There are many NGOs in Kyrgyzstan and the Muftiate is one of them. To be honest, their real influence is quite insignificant. If someone says, "we do not obey them," the Muftiate is not able to do anything. The State Commission on Religious Affairs however has more capabilities, but they also have many responsibilities, and not enough people and resources. It would be good if there is an interdepartmental structure or a working group. All the work in this direction should be carried out within the framework of joint cooperation and agreements".<sup>70</sup>

Former Rector of the Islamic University Mars Ibraev in his interview with the Bulan Institute noted that anyone wishing to receive religious education abroad should first receive a basic

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<sup>68</sup> RIA News, "The authorities of Kazakhstan are planning to ban religious education abroad", 3 August, 2017, <https://ria.ru/20170803/1499685151.html>

<sup>69</sup> Gezziter.org, "Parliament: let's improve religious education", 12 December, 2012, [http://m.gezziter.org/society/16690\\_parlament\\_naladim\\_religioznoe\\_obrazovanie/](http://m.gezziter.org/society/16690_parlament_naladim_religioznoe_obrazovanie/)

<sup>70</sup> Bulan Institute's interview with Nurzhigit Kadyrbekov, November 17, 2017.

education in Kyrgyzstan. "All those, who graduate from foreign madrasas adhere to a certain ideology of those educational institutions. After coming back home they start spreading that ideology. If we are not indifferent to the future of our state, we must think about where we are sending our children to study."

Baktiyar Toktogaziev, who received his religious education in Syria and Lebanon, considers it to be a big problem that Kyrgyz Ministries do not recognize diplomas of foreign religious higher educational institutions. He states: "In order to teach the subject of theology, it is necessary to certify such a diploma through a notary. At the same time, the Ministry does not have standards of religious education. In those cases, when a graduate of a foreign religious institution wishes to work in the public educational sphere, the problem arises. There is, however, no problem with employment in a religious sphere. Therefore, it would be good if standards for religious education would be developed. In the meantime, young people receiving religious education abroad are left on their own."

A well-known theologian and professor at the Islamic University in Bishkek Ulan Usupov believes that agreements should be concluded only with those educational institutions where education conforms with the Hanafi *madhab* widespread in Kyrgyzstan. He particularly highlights the educational institutions of Turkey, with their high quality of education, and he sees no threat in them. He strongly criticises those influenced by Salafi beliefs: "After returning back home, many start spreading Salafism. Why do we need Salafis? Even during Friday prayers, one can distinguish those who adhere to the ideology of Salafism. They neglect general religious norms, they read *namaz* differently. Therefore, one should not be afraid of Turkish religious educational institutions. There, Doctor of Sciences and Professors are teaching. We need to conclude agreements only with educational institutions that adhere to our *madhab* and send our young people to study there."

"When speaking of control through the state, one needs to specify, what exactly that means and whether the state is supposed to restrict, intervene, or simply regulate. The state cannot restrict, because it has no right to impose restrictions on the movement of citizens or their rights to receive an education. Even if a person says: "I am going abroad and not as a tourist, but to study at a madrasa you do not like - I am going to Pakistan," the state cannot do anything about it," says Mametbek Myrzabaev, the director of the Institute for the Study of Islam. In his opinion, only the following can be offered to those wishing to study abroad: "Look, these are the educational institutions, that are reliable, good madrasas, with agreements with the Muftiate (if available), and you should study there. The state, therefore, should compile a list of advisable educational institutions, and advise people to choose institutions from that list; only those who have graduated from the institutions on the list should be allowed to work in a religious sphere. One can choose to study at any educational institutions, but the state should restrict who is then allowed to get engaged in the religious sphere. This would be a good lever for the state to regulate the process."<sup>71</sup>

According to Saifulla Bazarkulov, the state drafting of a prime list of reliable, trustworthy, foreign religious institutions where young people could receive religious education would be the right step. He elaborates: "This should not be perceived as enforcement, but rather as support in making a right choice. It would be good for relevant agencies to start working in this direction and compile a list of foreign educational institutions; those going to study

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<sup>71</sup> Bulan Institute's interview with Mamedbekova Myrzabaeva, November 20, 2017.

abroad should receive approval from relevant agencies. This would be of a great benefit to both citizens and the state. This should not be perceived as some type of censorship. As folk wisdom says, 'God protects the protected'."

According to the opinion of an independent expert, Daniyar Muradilov, the State Commission on Religious Affairs should compile a database of all foreign educational institutions teaching Islam. He notes: "It would be wonderful if such a database would be compiled, with the Ministry of Education taking care of the pedagogical and methodological side of education, while the State Commission on Religious Affairs takes care of the religious component, and then jointly offering citizens a list of reliable educational institutions. This would be a great help to all those wanting to study abroad to make the right choices and would also ease many things for the state as well."<sup>72</sup>

All Bulan Institute interviewers - experts, theologians and religious figures, noted that the situation is in need of change and that it is time for the state to find levers for regulating the issue of religious education at foreign educational institutions. Many of them spoke positively about the initiative of the State Commission on Religious Affairs to propose a list of educational institutions.

## **5. Conclusions**

In recent years, there is a growing interest in Islam in Kyrgyzstan and it is expected that this trend will continue. Achieving the goals of the "Concept of the state policy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the field of religion for 2014-2020", adopted by the Security Council in 2014, is therefore of an urgent matter. Kyrgyzstan as a liberal state with respect towards human rights and does not accept the methods of restriction and coercion. However, concrete, real steps should be taken in order to improve the quality of education in religious educational institutions, in madrasas in particular, as well as measures to consolidate them. At the same time, there have always been and will be many of those willing to receive Islamic education abroad; the state, therefore, must find levers to regulated this process.

The Bulan Institute and the State Commission devoted almost three months to the study of this issue. Interviews were conducted with more than fifty experts, theologians and imams. The following conclusions are the results of our study:

1. Kyrgyz citizens prefer to travel to foreign countries on tourist visas and personal invitations, without notifying the state bodies. Therefore, no departments can accurately say how many Kyrgyz citizens currently receive Islamic religious education outside of the Republic;
2. There is a great danger that many Kyrgyz citizens, believing in promises or propaganda of certain individuals or religious organizations, may find themselves in educational institutions in countries such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh or others with no state registration and recognition. There is also a high likelihood of exposure to extremist religious movements. Therefore, we urge all those who wish to receive religious education abroad, to first turn to the State Commission on Religious Affairs or the educational department of the SAMK and get advice from them;

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<sup>72</sup> Bulan Institute's interview with Daniyar Muradilov, Bulan TV, October 30, 2017.

3. The Bulan Institute supports the initiative of the State Commission on Religious Affairs to prepare and provide a list of proven and authoritative educational institutions. This list will undoubtedly help those who want to study abroad, to correctly determine their path and get a quality education;
4. At present, there are 112 religious institutions currently registered in Kyrgyzstan. Those wishing to study abroad should first receive education in Kyrgyz madrasas and the Islamic Institute. A person must first receive basic knowledge of local Islamic traditions in our educational institutions before going abroad to study;
5. It is necessary to accelerate the implementation of the “The Concept of the state policy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the religious sphere for 2014-2020”. Bulan Institute calls on newly elected President Sooronbay Jeenbekov to take personal control over the implementation of the Concept;
6. In cooperation with the law enforcement agencies, it is necessary to take under special supervision of families traveling abroad for *daawah*. Particular attention should be paid to the given reasons and rationale of parents. Parents who leave their children in Bangladesh or elsewhere should be held accountable for depriving their children of the right to acquire education at general education schools. For this, the SAMK should take urgent measures jointly with our embassy in the respective country as well as law enforcement agencies;
7. The lack of a separate state provision on religious education and religious educational institutions negatively affects this situation. It is necessary, to set a working group consisting of representatives of the State Commission on Religious Affairs, the Muftiate, theologians, political scientists and independent experts, in order to draft a law addressing this oversight<sup>73</sup>;
8. It is necessary to develop and consolidate the classification of religious educational institutions, unified standards for religious secondary schools (madrasas) and higher religious educational institutions. These standards should include general education subjects;
9. The issue of improving the qualifications of teachers and directors of religious educational institutions remains urgent;
10. It is necessary to urgently conclude agreements with foreign religious educational institutions and send all those willing to study abroad only on the bases of agreements with these institutions;
11. Open a department or a sector under the Ministry of Education and Science of the Kyrgyz Republic for the licensing of religious educational institutions;
12. The SAMK and religious organizations should be in close contact with young citizens studying abroad as well as develop adaptation courses (on *madhab*, *aqidah*) for students upon the completion of their studies.

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<sup>73</sup> The draft law proposed in 2012 by Kanybek Osmonaliyev, the Deputy of the Parliament, was not adopted.