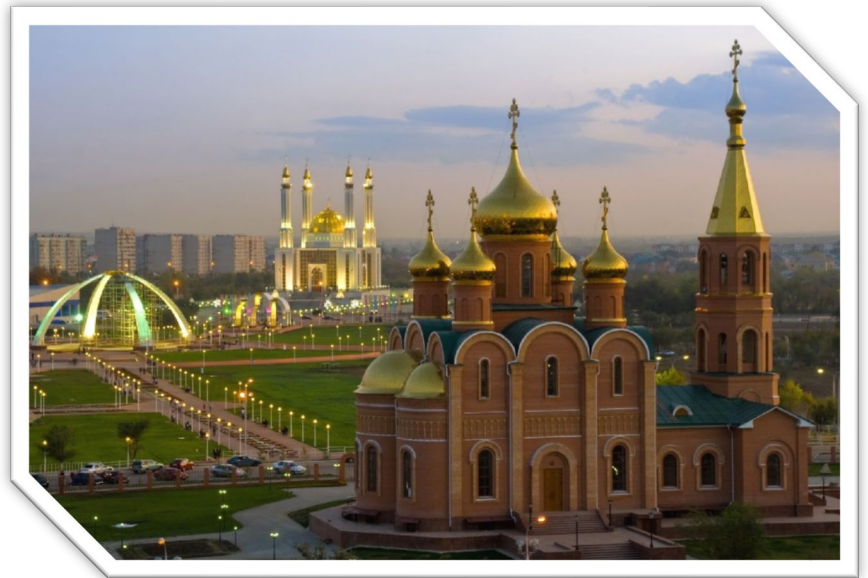


# NCSEJ Country Report



## Kazakhstan



Email: [Ncsejinfo@ncsej.org](mailto:Ncsejinfo@ncsej.org)  
Website: [NCSEJ.org](http://NCSEJ.org)

# Table of Contents

**Executive Summary**.....3  
The ninth-largest country in the world, independent Kazakhstan has worked to overcome a Soviet legacy of underdevelopment. *Read more.*

**History**.....4  
Kazakhstan is the second-largest Soviet successor state after Russia, and the ninth-largest country in the world. As large as Western Europe, and nearly four times the size of Texas, Kazakhstan hosts dozens of ethnic groups and religious denominations. *Read more.*

**Political Situation**.....5  
The Kazakh constitution, adopted by referendum in 1995, established a bicameral parliament, a judiciary, and an executive branch headed by a popularly elected President who serves a five-year term. *Read more.*

**Economic Situation** .....6  
The breakup of the Soviet Union led to a severe economic contraction in Kazakhstan in the early-to-mid 1990s. In response, the government accelerated privatization and economic reform with support from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, halting further decline. *Read more.*

**Religious Policy** .....8  
The constitution defines the country as a secular state and provides for freedom of religion and belief, as well as for the freedom to decline religious affiliation. *Read more.*

**Foreign Policy** .....9  
Since independence, Kazakhstan has pursued, with a large measure of success, equally good relations with Russia, China, Europe, and the United States. *Read more.*

Relations with the U.S. .....10  
    The United States was the first country to recognize Kazakhstan when it declared its independence in December 1991. The U.S. embassy in Almaty opened in January 1992. *Read more.*

Relations with Israel .....12  
    Kazakhstan has good relations with Israel. Diplomatic ties were established in 1992, and the countries have reciprocal embassies. Since 1989, an estimated twenty thousand Kazakh Jews have made *aliyah*. *Read more.*

**Jewish Communal Life**..... 13  
Today, Kazakhstan is home to between 15-20,000 Jews, most of whom are descendants of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Ashkenazi immigrants from Europe and European Russia. Leaders of the Jewish communities in Kazakhstan reported no incidents of anti-Semitism by the government or in society. *Read more.*

# Executive Summary

The ninth-largest country in the world, independent Kazakhstan has worked to overcome a Soviet legacy of underdevelopment. Kazakhstan today has one of the most robust economies in Central Asia, thanks to substantive market reforms, strong government stewardship, significant foreign investment, and abundant energy and mineral resources.

Kazakhstan’s former long-serving President Nursultan Nazarbayev was in power for 30 years. He was re-elected four times (most recently in 2015, to a new five-year term), before resigning the presidency in March 2019. He used his country’s strategic location and extensive energy reserves to balance skillfully among Russia, China, Europe, and the United States, and positioned Kazakhstan as an aspiring regional leader. Kazakhstan’s near-term challenges include achieving sustainable economic development outside the oil, gas, and mining sectors and mitigating the Soviet legacy of extensive environmental pollution and the drying of the Aral Sea.

Thanks to its large size and surging economy, Kazakhstan enjoys growing leverage over other central Asian states. Relations with key neighbors Russia and China are good and feature growing economic and security cooperation. The United States has praised Kazakhstan for its cooperation on U.S.-led non-proliferation, security, and counter-terrorism efforts. The U.S. has maintained a positive relationship with Kazakhstan despite criticism of its human rights record.

The Jewish community of Kazakhstan is composed both of long-settled Bukharan Jews and more recent Ashkenazic immigrants from the era of Russian rule. Jewish relations with the Kazakh government are excellent, and no anti-Semitic acts have been reported recently. Kazakhstan maintains cordial relations with Israel. Former President Nazarbayev is an advocate of interfaith dialogue among registered religious groups (including the Jewish community), of moderate Islam, and of peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

## Statistics:

**Population:** 18,556,998

(July 2017 est.)

**Size:** 2,724,900 sq km

**Capital:** Astana

**Major cities:** Almaty,  
Karaganda, Chimkent

**Jewish population:**  
approximately 15-20,000

## Head of State:

President Kassym-Jomart  
Tokayev

## Head of Government:

Prime Minister Alihan  
Smaiyllov

## Foreign Minister:

Mukhtar Tileuberdi

## Ambassador to United States:

Yerzhan Ashikbayev

## U.S. Ambassador to Kazakhstan:

Daniel Rosenblum

## Freedom House Rating:

Not Free

# History

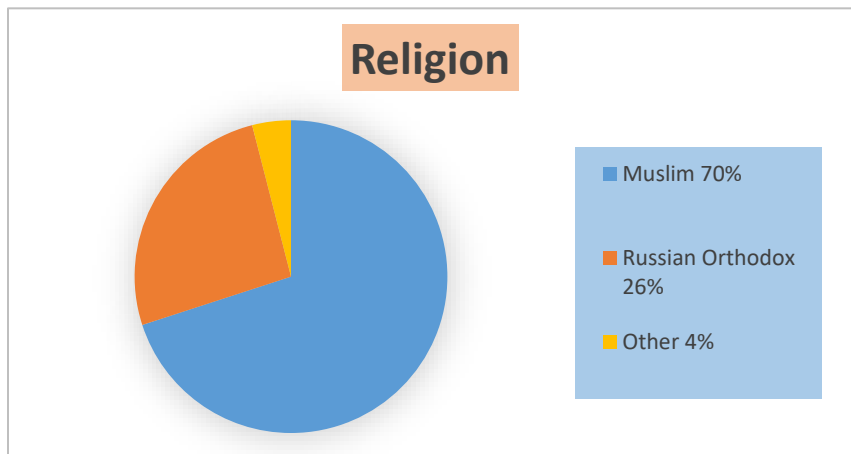
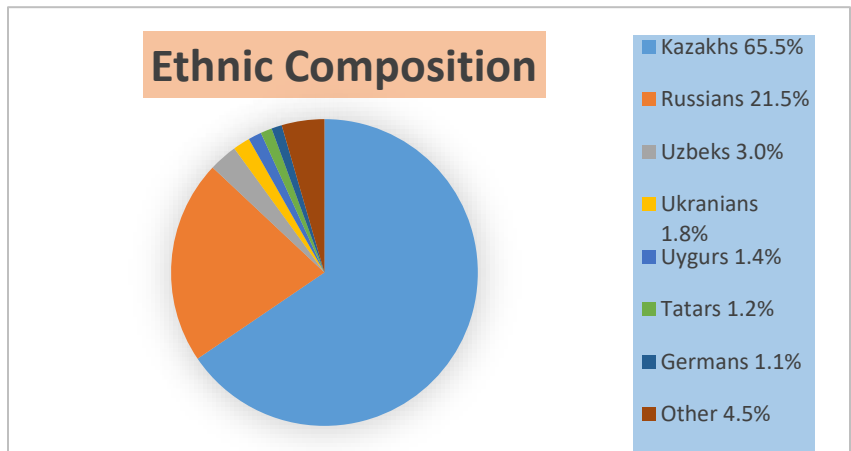
Kazakhstan is the second-largest Soviet successor state after Russia, and the ninth-largest country in the world. As large as Western Europe, and nearly four times the size of Texas, Kazakhstan hosts dozens of ethnic groups and religious denominations. It borders Russia, China, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and the Caspian and Aral Seas.

Long dominated by Central Asian nomads and their khanates (especially Mongols and Turks), Kazakhstan was annexed piecemeal by Russia in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, incorporated into the Soviet Union by 1920, and raised to Union Republic status in 1936.

When it gained its independence in 1991, Kazakhstan held more ethnic Slavs than ethnic Kazakhs, a legacy of Tsarist and Soviet policies of deportation and state-sponsored population resettlement. Kazakhstan's sparsely populated northern steppes were intensively settled with Russian-speaking farmers by Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev in his "Virgin Lands" campaign during the 1950s and early 1960s.

In Soviet-era Kazakhstan, the large Russian-speaking populace enjoyed preferential treatment over ethnic Kazakhs. After 1991, ethnic tensions and official policy (such as requiring Kazakh language proficiency for government jobs) led many Russian speakers to leave Kazakhstan, shrinking its population by a million; likewise, Kazakhs returned home

from other regions of the former Soviet Union, gaining automatic citizenship. Ethnic Kazakhs now enjoy majority status in their own country, although Russian speakers still form almost a third of the population.



## Political Situation

Kazakhstan is a presidential republic. The Kazakh constitution, adopted by referendum in 1995, established a bicameral parliament, a judiciary, and an executive branch headed by a popularly elected President who serves a five-year term. The upper house of parliament (the Senate) has 47 representatives serving six-year terms while the lower house (Mazhilis) has 107 representatives serving for five years.

Kazakhstan's politics since independence has been dominated by Nursultan Nazarbayev, its powerful former Communist Party chief and now former President. Nazarbayev was originally appointed head of the Kazakhstan Communist Party in 1989 by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Nazarbayev was elected Kazakhstan's first President for a five-year term in December 1991. Following legislative elections in 1994 that were ultimately invalidated by the Constitutional Court, Nazarbayev dissolved parliament and initiated a national referendum in April 1995. Official results showed 95% of voters supported Nazarbayev's proposal to extend his term until December 2000; another referendum held in August 1995 and boycotted by some oppositionists approved a new constitution that greatly expanded executive powers. Parliamentary elections held in December 1995 for a new bicameral legislature resulted in a sweep for pro-presidential candidates.

In October 1998, parliament approved Nazarbayev's proposal to reschedule presidential elections to January 1999, and to extend the presidential term from five to seven years. Nazarbayev easily won reelection with a reported 80% of the vote. His chief challenger, a former prime minister, was banned from running, and the OSCE declared the election non-democratic and below international standards.

The constitution and subsequent presidential decrees have concentrated power in the executive branch, with little power granted to or practiced by the legislature, the judiciary, or local administrators, who are appointed and dismissed by the President, as are the prime minister and all other members of the cabinet. However, in May 2007, Kazakhstan adopted constitutional amendments designed to reduce the powers of the presidency and boost parliamentary powers. The amendments took effect in 2012, eliminating term limits for Nazarbayev himself, and reducing presidential terms from seven to five years.

During the run-up to the 2005 presidential election, the government assumed greater powers to combat vaguely defined "extremism," and imposed new restrictions on civil society in the name of enhancing national security. Observers suggested that these steps were taken partly in response to recent popular uprisings in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, in which opposition groups, NGOs, and independent media played key roles in overthrowing unpopular authoritarian regimes. Threats and attacks against the opposition culminated in the killing of two leading opposition figures in late 2005 and early 2006.

The OSCE criticized the government's conduct during the campaign and election, claiming it limited meaningful political opposition and contributed to an atmosphere of intimidation. At the same time,

observers noted President Nazarbayev's genuine popularity at home, buoyed by growing prosperity and relative stability under his rule in a region roiled by open ethnic, political, and religious conflict.

In April 2011, Kazakhstan held early presidential elections, affirming a 2011 referendum to allow President Nazarbayev's rule to be extended until 2020. In April 2015, Kazakhstan again held early presidential elections, giving President Nazarbayev a victory, with 97.7% of the vote, for a fifth term in office.

**Currency:** \$1= 447.08 Tenge (2023)  
**GDP:** \$197.11 billion (2021)  
**GDP per capita** \$10,373.8 (2021 est.)  
**GDP Growth:** 4.3% (2021)

In a surprise announcement in March 2019, President Nazarbayev abruptly announced his resignation, without articulating a reason. Although stepping down as President, Nazarbayev will remain in control of the ruling political party, a member of several powerful government councils, and chairman for life of the Kazakh Security Council. Senate Speaker Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, an ally of Nazarbayev, assumed office as Acting President on March 20, and will fulfill Nazarbayev's remaining term until April 2020. The current Foreign Minister is Murat Nurtleu. The U.S. Ambassador to Kazakhstan is Daniel Rosenblum. The Kazakhstani Ambassador to the United States is Yerzhan Ashikbayev.

In 1994, President Nazarbayev proposed moving the capital from Almaty, its largest city, which lies close to the Kyrgyz and Chinese borders, to Astana in north-central Kazakhstan. After the move, Nazarbayev's government launched an ambitious, multi-billion-dollar development project to turn Astana into a symbol of national pride and identity.

As President, Nazarbayev was a strong advocate for non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. After the USSR's breakup, he dismantled Kazakhstan's nuclear arsenal and signed arms-reduction treaties. The government has called on the international community to help fund the rehabilitation of Kazakhstan's extensive Soviet-era nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons-testing areas, whose residual toxins contribute to continued high rates of diseases and genetic disorders in nearby regions.

## Economic Situation

The breakup of the Soviet Union led to a severe economic contraction in Kazakhstan in the early-to-mid 1990s. In response, the government accelerated privatization and economic reform with support from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, halting further decline.

Kazakhstan's subsequent growth can be attributed to its profitable energy sector, economic reforms, good harvests, and increased foreign investment. The World Bank ranks Kazakhstan as an upper-middle-income state.

In 2000, Kazakhstan became the first former Soviet republic to pay back its loans to the IMF, \$400 million in total, seven years ahead of schedule. In 2002, the U.S. government affirmed Kazakhstan's market economy status, and Kazakhstan became the first post-Soviet state to receive an investment-grade credit rating from a major international credit rating agency.

Significant increases in GDP and income growth have reduced poverty levels and the unemployment rate. Poverty nationwide decreased from 47% in 2001 to 5.2% in 2021 and unemployment levels dropped from 10% in 2001 to 5% in 2022.

Kazakhstan has major mineral reserves and massive fossil fuel reserves. It is a major exporter of raw materials and industrial goods. Much of Kazakh industry depends on resource processing. To avoid over-dependence on its energy and mining exports, Kazakhstan is promoting the growth of its other sectors, such as machine-building and light industry.

Oil and gas areas occupy 62% of the country, including 172 oil fields. Kazakhstan's oil exports in 2012 totaled \$55.2 billion, accounting for more than 60% of exports. Kazakhstan is the world's largest producer of uranium and has proven reserves of 65 trillion cubic feet of natural gas.

Economic relations between Russia and Kazakhstan are close. Kazakhstan depends on the use of Russian pipelines to export much of its oil, and Russia is Kazakhstan's largest export partner. In March 2001, Kazakhstan opened a pipeline from the Tenghiz oil field (the world's sixth largest) through Russian territory to the Black Sea port of Novorossiysk, connecting Caspian oil reserves to international markets.

In May 2014, the Russian, Belarusian, and Kazakh presidents met in Astana to form the Eurasian Economic Union, which came into force in January 2015. The EEU has an integrated single market of 183 million people and a gross domestic product of over \$4.0 trillion. Provisions for a single currency and greater integration are envisioned in future.

As one of the Caspian Sea's five littoral states (along with Azerbaijan, Iran, Russia, and Turkmenistan), Kazakhstan has been involved in longstanding disputes over control of potential Caspian Sea oil reserves. Unresolved issues include delimitation of a seabed boundary with Turkmenistan in the Caspian Sea. In August 2018, after 20 years of talks, the leaders of the five states signed a treaty defining territorial water borders. The 'Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea' has not resolved all the long-standing issues, including the delimitation of the seabed and oil exploitation, but the treaty represents an important step for economic development and regional security.

Kazakhstan has also been troubled by Tajikistan's plans to build a dam in the Amu Darya Basin, which would harm Kazakhstan's agricultural sector. However, in February 2015, Kazakhstan loosened its opposition and suggested it may explore plans for dam construction and creation of a regional hydroelectric consortium.

In July 2018, the government of Kazakhstan officially opened the Astana International Financial Center (AIFC), an ambitious project modelled on the Dubai International Financial Center, which aims to offer foreign investors an alternative jurisdiction for operations, with tax holidays, flexible labor rules, a

Common Law-based legal system, a separate court and arbitration center, and flexibility to carry out transactions in any currency. Since 2019, the government has pursued a policy of using the AIFC as a regional investment hub to attract foreign investment to Kazakhstan. The government has recommended foreign investors use the law of the AIFC as applicable law for contracts with Kazakhstan. In January 2021 the AIFC on behalf of Kazakhstan joined the Central Asia Investment Partnership initiated by the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC).

## Religious Policy

The constitution defines the country as a secular state and provides for freedom of religion and belief, as well as for the freedom to decline religious affiliation. These rights may be limited only by laws and only to the extent necessary for protection of the constitutional system, public order, human rights and freedoms, and the health and morality of the population. Under the constitution, everyone has the right to follow their religious or other convictions, take part in religious activities, and disseminate their beliefs. These rights, however, are in practice limited to “traditional” or registered religious groups. The law states the government shall not interfere with the choice of religious beliefs or affiliation of citizens or residents, unless those beliefs are directed against the country’s constitutional framework, sovereignty, or territorial integrity.

The Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA), part of the Ministry of Religious and Civil Society Affairs (MRCSA), is responsible for religious issues. The MRCSA is broadly in charge of facilitating government and civil society engagement, as well as overseeing religious issues. It implements its responsibilities for religious issues via the CRA. By law, the MRCSA is responsible for forming and implementing state policy on religious freedom. It also considers issues of potential violations of the laws on religious activity and extremism. The MRCSA drafts legislation and regulations, conducts analysis of religious materials, and makes decisions on censorship. Religious groups are required to submit all religious materials for approval before dissemination. The MRCSA cooperates with law enforcement to ban religious groups and sanction individuals who violate religion laws, coordinates local government actions to regulate religious issues, and provides the official interpretation of the religion law.

The Law on Religious Freedom, passed October 2011, applies registration restrictions on missionaries and religious groups, giving government a right to deny a legal status to religious associations, and to ban certain religious literature and religious ceremonies. The law required every religious group to re-register, to let the Government assess whether each religion association is based on religion rather than an ideology. In 2015, the UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion recommended “far-reaching reforms” to the 2011 religion law, finding, for example, that “non-registered religious communities... suffer from serious infringements of their freedom of religion.”

In June 2017, the president signed a strategy document outlining the government’s religion policy for the 2017-2020, affirming the country’s secular orientation, stating the government would focus on preventing “destructive” religious teachings and tightening control over religious activity. During 2017 and 2018, the MRCSA and police closely monitored all religious activities and proceeded with legal and



administrative actions against individuals and groups for actions considered illegal under the law. Such actions included unauthorized gatherings, distribution of unapproved religious materials, involvement of minors in religious services, attendance at unsanctioned religious services, religious school outfits deemed inappropriate in a secular society by the government, and the alleged failures of religious organizations to secure their buildings of worship against potential terrorist attacks.

According to local and international observers, authorities imposed restrictions and heightened scrutiny on so-called “nontraditional” religious groups. U.S. government has raised concerns over the restrictive effects of the government’s implementation of the religion law and criminal and administrative codes on religious freedom. It also has concerns about the inconsistent application of the religion law and the criminal and administrative codes with regard to “nontraditional” versus “traditional” religious groups.

## Foreign Policy

Since independence, Kazakhstan has pursued, with a large measure of success, equally good relations with Russia, China, Europe, and the United States.

U.S.-Kazakhstan cooperation in security and non-proliferation is a cornerstone of the relationship. The Kazakh government has been extremely supportive of the U.S.-led war against terrorism and Kazakhstan has allowed the use of its airfields and air corridors, and shared intelligence information. Energy is an important area of cooperation; the Joint Kazakhstan-American Commission on Energy Partnership convenes annually, focusing on nuclear security, hydrocarbons, renewables, and energy efficiency.

In February 2003, the Kazakh government hosted the first International Conference on Peace and Harmony, which brought together Central Asian and Caspian leadership, and representatives of Jewish and Muslim groups from many nations, to promote interfaith tolerance while condemning terrorism and extremism. A follow-up Congress of the Leaders of World and Traditional Religions in September 2003 brought together political and religious delegations from across the world. Kazakhstan held the Sixth Congress of the Leaders of World and Traditional Religions in Astana in October 2018. Nazarbayev has described hosting such multi-confessional meetings as his contribution to global security.

Kazakhstan remains an important trade partner of Russia, holding third place in trade among the CIS countries. Active economic and financial integration with several other CIS countries is being implemented within the Customs Union of the Eurasian Economic Community. The Eurasian Economic Union entered into force in January 2015. It is expected that a supranational body to regulate the integrated financial market of Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus within the Eurasian Customs Union will be created in 2025.

The creation of the EEU is the new integration stage for participating countries. Kazakhstan, Belarus and Russia will guarantee a free movement of goods, service, assets and work force, and also implement coordinated policies in such economic spheres as energy, industrial sector, agriculture and transport.

The ultimate goal of such steps is to complete the formation of the biggest common market in the CIS area, with 170 million people, though lacking a common currency like the euro.

Kazakhstan's growing relationship with China is boosted by Chinese interest in transporting and receiving Kazakh oil and investing in the Kazakh economy, and joint security cooperation. Kazakhstan is a member of NATO's Partnership for Peace and acceded to the World Trade Organization in June 2015. Kazakhstan is a member of the regional Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and has staged joint security exercises with both China and Russia.

Kazakhstan provided Ukraine with humanitarian aid after the beginning of military conflict in southeast Ukraine in 2014. In January 2015, Kazakhstan sent \$400,000 worth of aid to Ukraine's southeastern regions to help ease the humanitarian crisis.

### **Relations with the U.S.**

The United States was the first country to recognize Kazakhstan when it declared its independence in December 1991. The U.S. embassy in Almaty opened in January 1992.

Early U.S.-Kazakh relations were marked by significant cooperation in security and non-proliferation. With U.S. assistance and encouragement, Kazakhstan renounced its Soviet-legacy nuclear weapons in 1993 and removed them in 1995, sending over a half-ton of weapons-grade uranium to the United States. Kazakhstan has signed all major international arms control treaties and has reduced stockpiles through such programs as Cooperative Threat Reduction. U.S. funding also supports the strengthening of border security. Since 1993, USAID has funded programs to enhance communications, political reform, education, health care, microenterprise, community development, and market reform.

The Kazakh government has been extremely supportive of the U.S.-led war against terrorism. Over 800 U.S. flights over Kazakh territory were approved during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Kazakhstan has also allowed the use of its airfields and air corridors and has shared intelligence information with the United States. The two countries engage in joint military exercises and training.

As part of the 1974 U.S. Trade Act, the Jackson-Vanik Amendment imposed trade restrictions on the Soviet Union in response to its inadequate human rights policy, particularly restricting emigration of religious minorities, and anti-Semitism. The amendment stated that non-market economies that continue to impose emigration restrictions on their citizens would not be granted permanent normal trade relations or most favored nation status with the United States. In March 2002, the U.S. granted Kazakhstan market-economy status, though as of publication, Kazakhstan has not graduated from Jackson-Vanik.

Several years of Kazakh-American cooperation were marked by agreements reached by President Nazarbayev and President Obama in 2010, 2011, and 2012 in regional security, Afghanistan stabilization, economic and trade cooperation, investment, energy, and science.

In November 2015, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry visited Astana. The sides discussed the conflict in eastern Ukraine, cooperation in countering the threats of ISIL, terrorism, and violent extremism. The United States and five post-Soviet Central Asian states (C5+1) signed a Joint Declaration of Partnership and Cooperation declaring their commitment to greater cooperation, including holding regular meetings, protecting human rights, developing democratic institutions and practices, and strengthening civil society through respect for recognized norms and principles of international law.

Foreign Minister Idrissov and Secretary Kerry launched the fifth Strategic Partnership Dialogue on September 20, 2016, in New York City. Both sides reaffirmed their commitment to stopping the spread of weapons of mass destruction, the threat of terrorism and violent extremism, and continuing to combat climate change.

Prime Minister Sagintayev visited the United States in April 2017. The Prime Minister met with the CEO of Chevron, representatives of large financial institutions, and tech companies in Silicon Valley. During the Prime Minister's visit, the U.S. and Kazakh sides signed an agreement on opening a Representative Office of Kazakhstan in the Silicon Valley.

In 2017, an NCSEJ leadership delegation visited Astana and Almaty. They met with senior government officials, including the foreign minister, state secretary, religious leaders, and members of the Kazakh Jewish community.

In January 2018, President Donald Trump hosted President Nazarbayev at the White House to discuss an enhanced bilateral strategic partnership. The two leaders reaffirmed the independence, territorial integrity, and sovereignty of Kazakhstan, its role in advancing global peace and prosperity, and bilateral cooperation on military technology, education, and peacekeeping.

The U.S. State Department's coordinator for counterterrorism, Nathan Sales, visited Kazakhstan on October 7 and 8, 2019, to discuss the U.S. – Kazakhstan counterterrorism partnership and Kazakhstan's efforts to repatriate its citizens from Syria. Ambassador Sales said that Kazakhstan's repatriation program could serve as a roadmap for other countries to do the same.

U.S. companies are the second largest investors in Kazakhstan. In 2019, \$5.5 billion of FDI was directed to Kazakhstan from the U.S., which accounted for 23% of total FDI in the country.

On February 28, 2023, Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with his counterpart Foreign Minister Muktar Tileuberdi in Astana.

In May 2023, the US House of Representatives introduced H.R. 3611 to graduate Kazakhstan from the Jackson-Vanik Amendment. As of June 5, 2023, the bill has been referred to the House Ways and Means Committee.

## **Relations with Israel**

Kazakhstan has good relations with Israel. Diplomatic ties were established in 1992, and the countries have reciprocal embassies. Since 1989, an estimated twenty thousand Kazakh Jews have made *aliyah*.

Israel's Center for International Cooperation, MASHAV, has partnered with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to develop Kazakh agriculture and micro-enterprise. MASHAV partnered with USAID to assist in the building of a dam to help restore the Aral Sea. In addition, MASHAV supplements agribusiness training centers and administers health clinics throughout Kazakhstan.

Numerous Israeli companies are involved with projects in Kazakhstan. Israel has participated in the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia, including the 2002 Summit where it signed the Almaty Act, establishing a body of twenty-six countries supporting multilateral approaches towards promoting peace, security and stability in Asia. Kazakhstan was among countries interceding on behalf of thirteen Jews who were put on trial in Iran in 2001.

Israeli President Shimon Peres visited Kazakhstan on an official visit in June 2009, where he met with President Nazarbayev, Prime Minister Karim Masimov, and then-Senate Speaker Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. President Peres discussed various diplomatic and security issues as well as the potential for economic-technological cooperation. In addition, President Peres was a keynote speaker at the July 2009 Third Congress of World Religions.

In January 2014, Kazakhstan's defense minister visited Israel, where he met with various officials including President Peres, and discussed intensification of bilateral military cooperation. In February 2014, immediate past Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak met with President Nazarbayev to discuss possibilities for further cooperation on unmanned systems, border security, command-and-control capabilities as well as satellite communications. In May 2014, the Ministers of Defense of Israel and Kazakhstan signed an agreement on military-technical cooperation.

In May 2015, Israel and Kazakhstan constructed the Israel-Kazakhstan Irrigation Demonstration Center in the Almaty region. In December 2016, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu visited Kazakhstan and held talks with President Nazarbayev in Astana. The two leaders discussed trade cooperation and the fight against terrorism, and signed documents related to visa-free travel, aviation, communications, and other issues.

In January 2018, The Israeli embassy in Kazakhstan launched the Alghys (Gratitude) project, dedicated to the 70th anniversary of Independence of Israel and the Day of Gratitude in Kazakhstan. The aim of the initiative is to collect the stories of Kazakh citizens whose families helped the Jews fleeing to Kazakhstan in 1930s-1940s.

In April 2018, the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange signed an agreement with Kazakhstan's new stock exchange to help set up cybersecurity protection systems.

In January 2022, Israeli citizen Gary Koren was killed in Almaty from gun fire. As a result of Koren's death, violent unrest ensued in the area. Despite hostilities, Israel remains fervent that there will be no Israeli

evacuation from Kazakhstan, signaling reassurance that the Kazakh government could contain the situation and to maintain strong ties between Israel and Kazakhstan.

## **Jewish Communal Life**

Today, Kazakhstan is home to approximately 15,000-20,000 Jews, most of whom are descendants of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Ashkenazi immigrants from Europe and European Russia. Only an estimated 2,000 are Bukharan and Tat Jews, who have resided in Kazakhstan for up to 2,000 years. Many Kazakh Jews are descendants of Russian army conscripts sent to Kazakhstan during the time of the Russian Empire.

The country's Jewish population increased during the Soviet period, in part due to the Soviet practice of exiling politically and economically "suspect" elements, especially during Stalin's rule. An estimated 8,500 Jews fled to Kazakhstan from Eastern Europe during World War II, escaping German occupation and the Holocaust. Almaty has the largest Jewish population, with 11,000 people. Smaller communities exist in other cities, including Karaganda, Chimkent, Astana, Semipalatinsk, and Kokchetav.

The Kazakh Jewish community enjoys a stable environment and well-organized religious and cultural life. Established in 1992, the MITSVA Association coordinates the social services and cultural and religious work of fifteen Jewish cultural associations, thirteen welfare organizations, and twelve Jewish community centers. The welfare organizations, funded by private donations and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC/ "Joint") help 10,000 Jews in more than 90 cities and towns through soup kitchens, home care for the elderly, medical services, and summer camps.

The Jewish Congress of Kazakhstan was created in December 1999 to help unify the Kazakh Jewish community, with businessman and philanthropist Alexander Mashkevich as its president. Mashkevich served as president of the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress from 2005 till 2011. Mashkevich plays an influential role in the Kazakh Jewish community. He has contributed substantial funds to the Jewish community and has been the primary donor for the construction of new synagogues in Kazakhstan.

The Association of Jewish Communities of Kazakhstan, a Chabad Lubavitch organization led by Chief Rabbi Yeshaya E. Cohen, plays an active role in Kazakhstan's Jewish community. Chabad Lubavitch operates a Jewish center called Beis Menachem and conducts services at synagogues in Almaty, Astana, and Chimkent. Chabad offers Jewish day school, food distribution services, elderly care, and summer camp for Jewish children.

The Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI) maintains an office in Almaty and actively participates in Jewish life throughout Kazakhstan, promoting Jewish identity while working with other Jewish organizations. JAFI sponsors Jewish youth centers throughout Kazakhstan, the largest of which is in Almaty. These centers serve as a hangout for Jewish teens as well as a forum for teaching Jewish culture.

Jewish education and cultural activities have expanded steadily since independence. Fourteen Jewish supplementary schools operate in Kazakhstan with more than seven hundred students in attendance. Chabad's Ohr Avner Gershuni Jewish Day School enrolls nearly 100 children. In 2000, the Jews of Uralsk established a Jewish Culture Society and have since received offers of material and financial aid from the local government.

Jewish leaders in Kazakhstan characterize government relations as positive. In a December 1999 visit to New York, Nazarbayev personally presented historical records on the late Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson's father – who was exiled to Kazakhstan during the Soviet era and is buried in Almaty – to Lubavitch leaders.

In September 2004, the largest synagogue in Central Asia was dedicated in Almaty. Funded by Mashkevich and named after his mother, Beit Rachel is large enough to accommodate all five hundred of Astana's Jews. In 2006, a new synagogue and community center opened in Ust-Kamenogorsk, a new Torah scroll was completed for the first time in the history of Kazakhstan's Jewish community, both chief rabbis of Israel visited Kazakhstan, and the country's first-ever Association for Hebrew Speakers formed. NCSEJ was represented at the dedication.

In 2018, the Jewish community of Kazakhstan lit a menorah in the capital city of Astana, for the first time in years. The menorah was displayed outside the Pyramid of Peace and Reconciliation, one of the country's top tourist attractions, with the approval of President Nazarbayev and Astana mayor Bakhyt Sultanov.

In 2019, an educational program called JFUTURE, with the support of the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress, opened a network of seventeen Jewish Sunday schools across Europe and Eurasia, including a school in Kazakhstan. The schools are aimed at involving families not active in Jewish communal life.

In August 2020, the government of Kazakhstan added the gravesite of Levi Yitzchak Schneerson, a leader of the Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidic movement, to its list of national heritage sites.

In December 2021, President Tokayev signed an amendment to make holding religious events more difficult unless the places of worship are state registered. The amendment's impact depends on how the police and agencies enforce the law, leaving doubts over religious freedoms. The Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and the Rule of Law published a report noting the governments repeated attacks on right to assemble.

Leaders of the Jewish communities in Kazakhstan reported no incidents of antisemitism by the government or in society.