



Article

## Modeling Alternatives for Imams' Role and Islam Development in Post-Pandemic Kazakhstan

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### Abstract

*Futures thinking plays a critical role in detecting prospects and opportunities in different spheres of human life, including its spiritual dimension. The paper uses the online survey results from Kazakhstani imams during the quarantine to identify the issues they faced. The data help develop four alternative scenarios of post-pandemic futures for the Muslim community in the Republic. Each option focuses primarily on the role of imams under specific circumstances. These scenarios are (1) A Spiritual Suq on the Internet Open Spaces, (2) IT-Tajdīd: the Kazakhstani Version, (3) "Virtual Imam"; and (4) Fitnah under Lockdown.*

### Keywords

Islam, Alternative Scenarios, Quarantine, Kazakhstan, Imam, 2x2 Matrix

### Introduction

COVID-19 has exposed critical vulnerabilities worldwide. Among them are the interdependence of everything in an extremely shrinking world, the chaotic nature of global events, and the complexity of the decision-making processes under growing uncertainty. Suddenly, issues related to financing social workers, government agencies, and all those «who hold our society together, ...strengthening our civic infrastructure for the crises yet to come» (Mazzucato, 2020), became immensely important. In these circumstances, it is hard to ignore those who care not so much about the economic component of our society but about its spiritual dimension. Besides, this component often directly influences all other human spheres. By "spiritual dimension," we mean a religious component that has proved to be influential in the post-secular world (Habermas, 2008).

The disappearance of the normal reality under COVID-19 has affected religion and religious organizations as much as politics, economy, culture. Like the other citizens, religious ministers had to adapt to the situation, change their lifestyle, and adjust to the new circumstances. The main discriminative repercussion for them, perhaps, was and still is the necessity to submit to human regulations rather than divine precepts. Thus, the never-ending conflict between the sacred and the profane is manifested once again. COVID-19 forces the religious component to transform, sometimes beyond recognition, before it can provide once again a hiding place for suffering souls. In the process, religion displays its ambivalence.

On the one hand, self-professed "believers" increase significantly in situations of crisis. People start looking for information about God more often (Vermishev, 2020), and apocalyptic sentiments of all kinds overwhelm the global Internet audience (Sardar, 2020). In addition, more people turn to spirituality because of the threat of death induced by mass media's daily reports on the coronavirus' high mortality rate (Kowalczyk et al., 2020, p. 2676). We can call this trend "religious foam"; it brings more numerical than qualitative changes. It is quite typical for situations like the coronavirus pandemic because "when being exposed to threat we use various strategies of survival, faith being one of them" (Kowalczyk et al., 2020, p. 2676).

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On the other hand, we can distinguish some emerging issues that under COVID-19 might rapidly grow into new trends with substantial impact on the future of religion. Even a brief horizon scanning helps to identify the following (Elsanousi, Visotzky & Roberts, 2020; Diseko, 2020; Haley, 2020):

- youth are becoming a critical force in all religious communities due to their invaluable capacity and proficiency to support digital communication;
- the gender equality pendulum is making another swing because a majority of religious practices are moved to homes and religious leaders have to encourage female participation and acknowledge their input;
- interreligious solidarity and partnership get a new stimulus in the field of virtual communication, charitable cations and/or bioethics;
- re-examination of routine rituals, liturgical patterns, and dogmas emerges as an urgent necessity in different denominations.

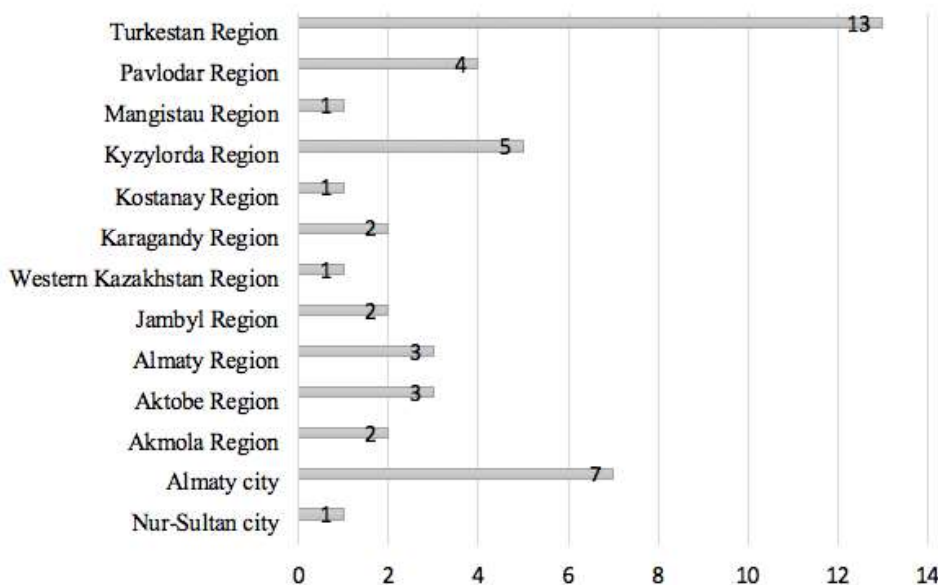
These weak signals are primarily stimulated by the believers' inability to attend churches, mosques, synagogues due to the quarantine. The latter has made impossible to fulfill customary and even obligatory in many confessions counseling and visitation. Moreover, the divine command to organize communal worship so typical for monotheistic religions and rooted in revelation, is abolished.

Therefore, we can conclude that COVID-19 has become a trigger for reevaluating some traditional religious components and even dogmas. While maintaining and even reinforcing the concept of God's character and His control over earthly affairs, the liturgical component is a subject to change meanings and essences (Faith in a time of COVID-19, 2020; "Dear Coronavirus" Videos Circle the World, 2020; Ghaly, 2020). God is the same, but His will manifestation is conditional to the present moment, thus calling human beings make efforts to recognize it (Muslims call it "*ijtihad*"). The circumstances make religious scholars and common lay people raise critical questions. What is a community of believers today? How to maintain spirituality and connection with God in isolation? Should some rites/obligatory duties/ordinances be replaced with something new and / or different?

Religious ministers of all denominations are on the front line; they have two options: either swim up the wave or they are drowned. How much were they prepared for such conditions? What difficulties have they encountered? The questions turned out to be far from idle for Kazakhstan, which is often considered a "Muslim-majority country." These matters triggered the research we conducted within the first months of the quarantine. Its results laid the foundation for the analysis and building futures alternative scenarios. As we are only ushering in the early stage of a post-pandemic world, we acknowledge that our findings are not final and far from being comprehensive. At the same time, we hope this work is a valuable contribution to the development of futures studies and futures thinking in Muslim communities of the Central Asian region.

### **Methodology: Futures Thinking in Current Reality**

The present research uses a bicomponent methodology. The first component is the online survey conducted between April 15 and May 13, 2020. It had a reconnaissance and descriptive nature and aimed to identify the issues that imams faced during the first wave of the quarantine in Kazakhstan. Moreover, this survey had to find out the main characteristics of Muslim ministers' activities during the total lockdown. 45 imams from various regions of Kazakhstan took part in the survey (Table 1):



**Table 1:** Imams Ministry Regions

This data fits the general picture of imams’ distribution in Kazakhstan; most of them are from the southern regions of the Republic, with the highest number of mosques there (The Official Site of the SAMK) (Table 2):

	<b>Region</b>	<b>Number of Mosques</b>
1	Karagandy	129
2	Aktober	140
3	Kyzylorda	150
4	South Kazakhstan (Turkestan)	887
5	Jambyl Reg. and Almaty	1010

**Table 2:** Kazakhstan Regions with the Highest Number of Mosques

We asked the survey participants to answer ten closed- and open-ended questions, including both alternative and multiple-choice inquiries with a personal answer option. The questionnaire that related to imams’ direct duties and activities helped determine how prepared they were for the circumstances emerged under COVID-19 (Appendix 1). At the same time, special attention was given to identifying uncertainties that could affect the future of those who, to one degree or another, profess Islam in Kazakhstan. This research focus was essential for developing the second component of the methodology.

The other part of our research included designing alternative futures. This futures section is important because of its specific intention to break down traditional concepts and old worldview ideas on Islam in Kazakhstan. It is a critical moment for the country because the scholarly and the official mass media discourses revolve predominantly around the so-called “traditional Islam” and “destructive sects.” Futures thinking helps to spot opportunities, use informed reflections of changes within ten, twenty, or more years, and shift our existing mental models to new ones. That is how we obtain a chance to create a different reality.

However, it is important to remember that alternative scenarios approach is not about forecasting or even predicting the future. It helps us foresee different types of plausible futures and choose the preferable one (Dator,

2009). For our research we have chosen the so-called “2x2 Matrix” method, which is one of the most popular scenario methods. It is relatively easy to apply, particularly under these new circumstances that challenge futurists to adjust their traditional group-work-in-a-room to online reality. Also, the 2x2 Matrix does not require a deep and profound study as Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) or Three Horizons, where initial research quest for trends, emerging issues, worldview characteristic and other specific features is required. Another critical reason for choosing this method relates to the poor IT skills of Kazakhstani imams, which will be discussed later. As long as face-to-face group meetings are impossible, researchers have to rely on the online interaction with their audience. Unfortunately, not as many as we wish can be reached due to objective factors such as the absence of Internet access.

The 2x2 Matrix method has its internal algorithm to follow. The first step includes identifying two variables or uncertainties, i.e., two factors that can cause the most significant changes and make the most profound impact on the phenomenon, organization, structure, or anything else under consideration (Rhydderch, 2017). The second step focuses on forming four combinations of the poles of the two uncertainties, from the most positive to the most negative and in-between. A system of axes illustrates this process demonstrating the focal issues addressed by foresight (Chart 1):

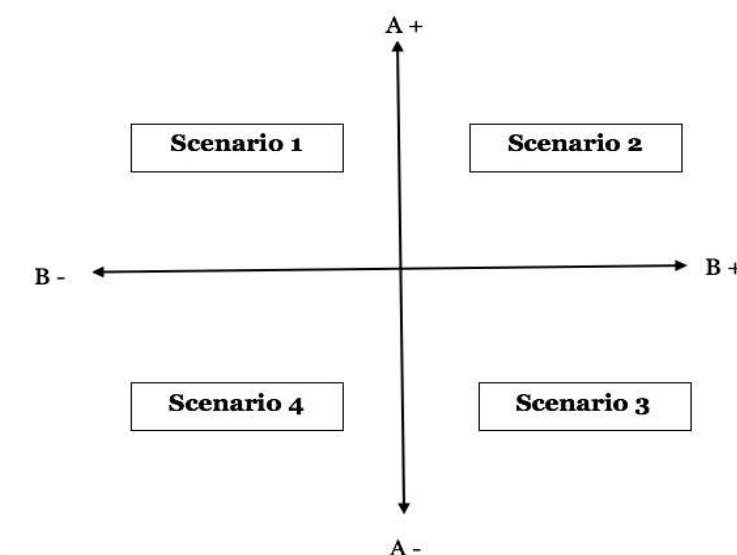


Chart 1: Visualizing 2x2 Matrix

The factors chosen for axes should warranty that the parameters of the four quarters are significantly different. Each quarter is a space for a potential scenario that can be developed into a more extended narrative that reflects the influence of earlier identified events, trends, and changing forces, thus completing the picture built by the uncertainty axes. The survey results we received have functioned as the initial data to elaborate the alternatives for the Kazakhstani Muslim community in the post-pandemic period and imam’s roles in them. Now we are going to present the survey data and its brief analysis.

### The Survey Results

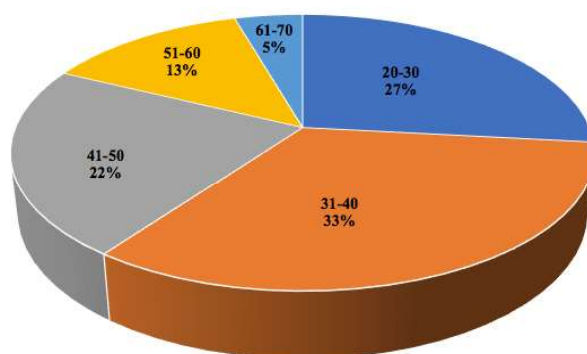
The received data is revealing. By the time the survey Google form was downloaded, Kazakhstan was under the state of emergency introduced by the Presidential Decree for the second month (Ukaz Prezidenta RK, 2020). The terms included strict restrictive quarantine measures, which led to the closure of mosques, churches, cathedrals, synagogues, etc. as places of mass gatherings. The introduction of such measures is justified from an epidemiological perspective. However, for Kazakhstani believers and ministers of all religious organizations, this was the first of its kind experience, which affected their daily life.

We formulated some hypotheses on how COVID-19 should change the context of imams’ ministry in the Republic:

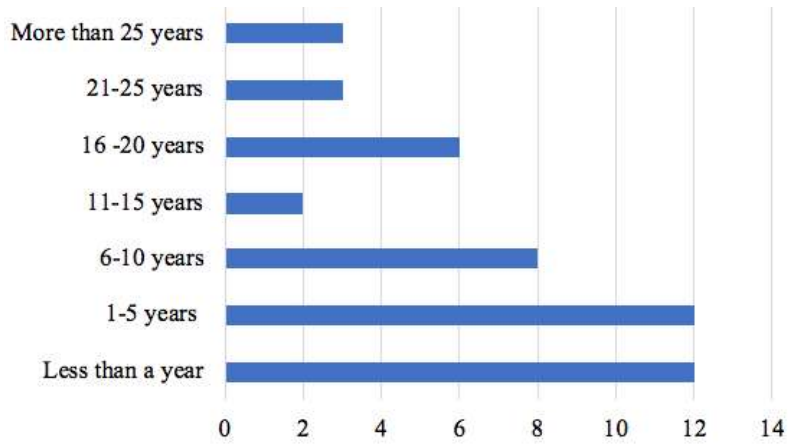
4. Taking into consideration that the majority of the country’s population (70.2%) (Kazakhstan Demographics Profile, 2019) declares their affiliation to Islam, one can expect a profound change in Muslim ministers’ life because their nurtured communities went under self-isolation, and places of worship, where they carry their primary duties were closed;
5. Since direct contact with believers and the usual performance of rituals in places of worship became impossible, the imams probably had to switch to virtual means of interaction;
6. In one way or another, the lockdown situation should influence Muslim ministers’ personal space and time. We proposed that it was a positive influence providing them with more time to spend with families, for self-education, and personal spiritual growth.

Our objective was to identify the real issues that Kazakhstani imams faced under new pandemic circumstances, along with the above-listed hypotheses. The answers to the question “What was the most difficult for you during the quarantine?” can serve as indicators of emerging issues, which will make a substantial impact on the further development of the Muslim *ummah* and imams’ ministry in Kazakhstan. These results will also help in developing alternative scenarios.

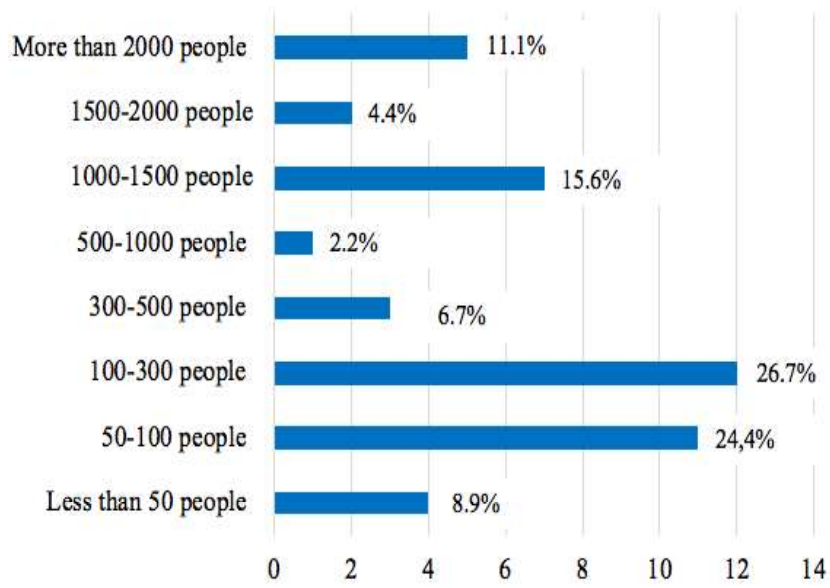
Therefore, analyzing the received data, we can create the following composite profile of the survey participants. Most of them are from the middle age group, i.e., they have mature personalities but are not burdened with the “past” and should have a clear understanding of the present moment (Graph 1). They belong to the category of young Muslim ministers who have worked up to 5 years (Graph 2) at mosques of small size, where between 50 and 300 people come to the Friday prayers (Graph 3). Concerning their education, the majority are graduates of the Institute of Imams Advanced Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan in Almaty, the second level of Islamic education in Kazakhstan. Imams can take this stage after graduating the madrasah (Graph 4).



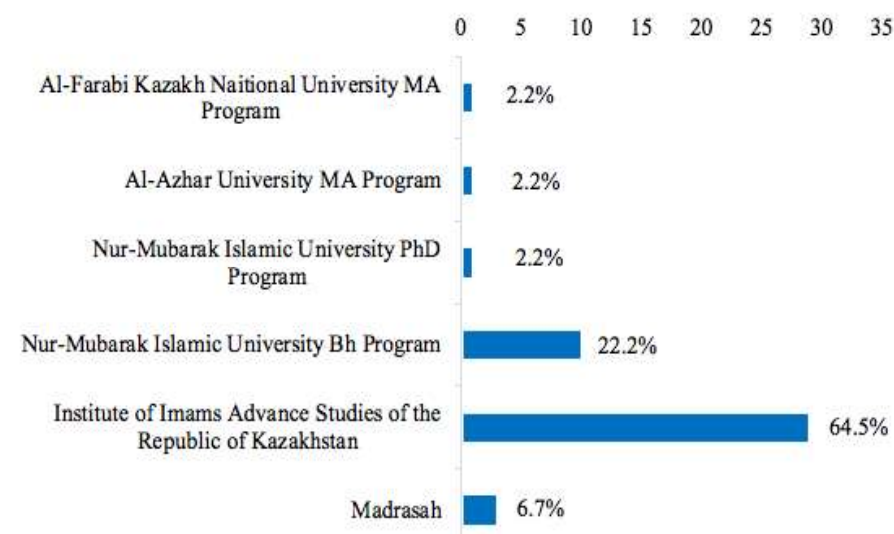
**Graph 1:** Respondents by Age Group



Graph 2: Respondents by Ministerial Experience



Graph 3: Mosque Size (Number of Friday Prayers Attendees)



Graph 4: Respondents by Educational Level

Thus, by analyzing the survey responses, we have got the following results.

Firstly, there was no evidence for the probability of severe changes in the imams’ ministry. By mid-April, the quarantine situation was quite serious in Kazakhstan, but it did not significantly impact Muslim ministers’ work. Only 24.4 % of the respondents mentioned that COVID-19 and the quarantine had a grave impact on their activities. The majority did not feel significant changes under new circumstances (Table 3):

	Answers	%
1	No change	24.4
2	Slightly changed	51.2
3	Seriously changed	24.4
	<b>TOTAL</b>	100

Table 3: Answers to the question “How has your ministry of imam changed due to COVID-19 and the quarantine?”

We can explain such results by the general level and quality of religiosity of the population. While acknowledging their affiliation with Islam, the overwhelming majority considers it a part of cultural and ethnic identity, not a matter of daily spiritual practice (Muzykina, 2019, p. 159-164). Therefore, the restrictions imposed by the quarantine measures did not require serious adjustments of one’s spiritual life, and hence any critical change (if any) in the imams’ ministry.

At the same time, the COVID-19 situation has increased interest among the imams in questions related to spiritual development and the Day of Judgment, the ritual and hygienic practices of Islam (Table 4). These results proved the fact that a crisis generates particular interest to the transcendental (Mchedlova, 2009; Corm, 2012):

	Answers	%
1	Correct observation of the pillars of Islam ( <i>namaz, oraza, etc.</i> )	51
2	Spiritual development	49
3	Hygiene practices in Islam	42
4	Issues of the Judgment Day and the end of the world	38
5	Marital and family relations	22

**Table 4:** What questions have drawn more of your attention during the quarantine? (Multiple choice)

The answers to the question about additional knowledge needed in some ministerial fields were the logical continuation of the imams' self-observation (Table 5):

	Answers	%
1	<i>Aqidah (creed)</i>	68
2	<i>Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence)</i>	61
3	Modern electronic means of communication	44
4	Arabic language	41
5	<i>Tafsir (qur'anic exegesis)</i>	36
6	Psychology	24
7	<i>Tasawwuf (inner purification)</i>	20
8	Interpersonal communication	18

**Table 5:** Answers to the question "The current situation has revealed that you, as an imam, need more knowledge on the following subjects" (multiple choice)

The fact that the above results highlight the modern communication means used as the third highly required skill, plus the answers about the frequency change in their utilization (Table 6), confirms our second hypothesis:

	Answers	%
1	Started to use it much more often	46.7
2	Learned new communication programs	35.6
3	Almost unchanged: use quite often	13.3
4	Almost unchanged: use quite rarely	2.2
5	No Internet at my place	2.2
	<b>TOTAL</b>	100

**Table 6:** Answers to the question "Please, evaluate how changed the frequency of your usage of electronic means during the quarantine"

It is clear that most imams had to switch to virtual means of communication against their will since the lockdown excluded direct contacts with believers. The necessity to continue carrying out their mission and fulfilling the ministerial duties forced many to master new technologies. At the same time, it turned out that there are imams who do not have ready access to the Internet. In the context of rapid technological developments, it can cause critical issues in the future.

The third hypothesis about the impact of the quarantine - including the positive one - on Muslim ministers' personal space and time also received its confirmation. When answering the question about the changes that the restricting measures brought, many respondents mentioned additional time for self-education, reading the Qur'an, and staying with the family (Table 7):



	Answers	%
1	I have more time for self-education and reading special literature ( <i>ahadith</i> , <i>tafsir</i> , etc.)	75.6
2	I have more time for reading and studying the Qur'an	46.7
3	I have more time for my family and relatives	44.0
4	I do more physical exercises now	22.2
5	I perform a longer <i>namaz</i> now	20.0

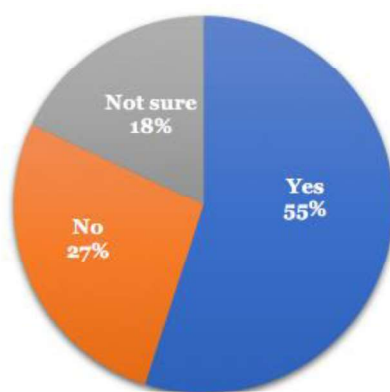
**Table 7:** Answers to the question “What has changed in your life as an imam?” (multiple choice)

In the situation of self-isolation Muslim ministers in Kazakhstan identified two personal problems:

- 7. Sustain and strengthen their spirituality as imams (51%)
- 8. Continue support communication with people (35.6 %)

This choice indicates the awareness of the role that imams are called for in society. Traditionally, “imam” in Islam is neither an ordinance nor a profession but a designated person who stands in front of the congregation during a prayer leading it (Islam. Encyclopedia, 1991, p. 97). However, due to the specific historical circumstances, a perception of the imam as a formal leader has developed in post-Soviet countries. The process of institutionalizing Islam supports this understanding. There is a strong notion that imams should enjoy authority among believers and have special theological education. Therefore, two tasks to maintain their spirituality and keep communication with people have mirrored imam’s main functions in Kazakhstan.

The data highlighted some uncertainties that emerged as the result of the global pandemic. The survey included a question about the possibility to remain a Muslim in the context of solely remote/virtual interaction. The results demonstrate mixed opinions (Graph 5):



**Graph 5:** Answers to the question “Is it possible to stay a Muslim interacting solely remotely / virtually?”

The measures to combat the coronavirus, which included a self-isolation regime and severe restrictions of any gathering more than three, destroyed the previously unshakable notion that being a Muslim is a given reality, like one’s ethnicity. Even though most respondents are confident that it is possible to remain a Muslim in any condition, they often comment that “the connection with others is necessary,” “the virtual communication is not enough,” “one can stay a Muslim, but it is harmful.” The idea of the *ummah* as a living body of people, united by a common religion while inhabiting different geographic territories seemed immutable until now. It is time perhaps to initiate a discussion about expanding the *ummah*’s limits, including the virtual space into its new definition.

X-raying the issues that Kazakhstani imams encountered during the quarantine, we find the following hierarchy (Table 8):

	Answers	%
1	Continue fulfilling my mission as an imam	46.7
2	Start using electronic means of social communication networks	37.8
3	Answer all incoming calls	6.7
4	Mosques closure	4.4
5	No opportunity to participate in funerals	2.2
6	Nothing	2.2

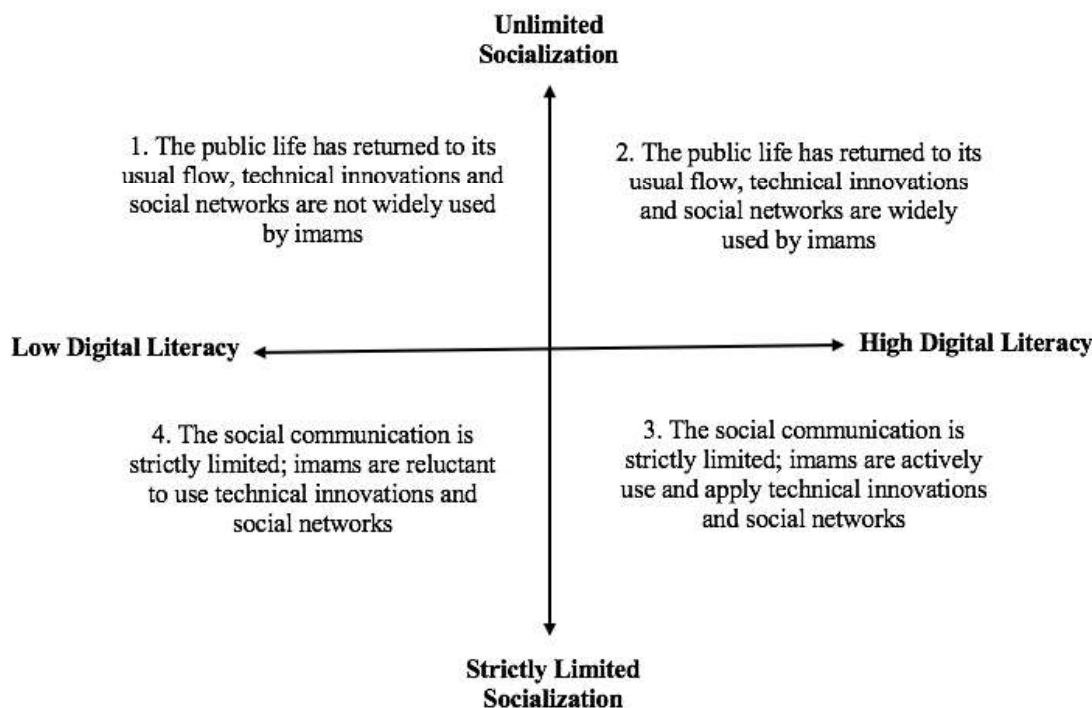
**Table 8:** Answers to the question “What was the most difficult for you during the quarantine?”

We can identify two uncertainties we need to accomplish in the second half of our work: (1) the possibility of off-line social functioning, including Muslim ministers’ public presence, and (2) technological advancement. We will use these two variables to build alternative scenarios of the Kazakhstani *ummah* post-COVID futures. Each one will include a specific role for imams under new circumstances.

**Four Scenarios: Modeling Alternative Futures**

Even though Muslim societies have stretched out through a huge region, from Jakarta in Indonesia to Tangier in Morocco, only a tiny handful of papers present research of their futures in the COVID-19 context (El Alaoui, Inayatullah & Salameh, 2020; Muzykina, 2020). Considering the wide range of languages, cultural and political systems that characterize Muslim countries, the futures scenarios building requires a context-oriented approach. Universal constructs will not work in an environment characterized by multiplicity, complexity, and contradictions aggravated by the postnormal chaos (Sardar, 2010). Therefore, we attach great importance to the empirical data collected during the online survey.

Based on these results, the starting point for the 2x2 Matrix consists of two factors with a high level of uncertainty in the Kazakhstani society: (1) the limits of open socialization; and (2) the level of imams’ digital literacy. The starting sketch, in this case, will look like the following (Chart 2):



**Chart 2:** The Basic Matrix 2x2 of Scenarios Planning

We need, then, to present each scenario in the form of a short narrative and determine the time frame of the future horizon. There are no fixed rules for choosing the timeframe. Traditionally, futures scenarios are planned for the coming 10-20 years and develop the matter/issue under consideration within that timeframe. If scenario planning includes specific trends and driving forces, e.g., connected to a political situation or development of a vaccine against COVID-19 like in our case, then the time horizon can be shortened to five, three, or even fewer years. As the claims for substantial progress in the vaccine development are getting more and more optimistic every day (Pfizer's and BioNTech's vaccine, 2020), it means that the return of free and unrestricted public life might happen within five coming years. At the same time, we do not want to extrapolate current trends on anticipated futures, thus getting the so-called "extended present" (Sardar & Sweeney, 2016). Therefore, the time horizon that we specified for alternative scenarios is ten years, which brings us to 2030.

The readers have to remember that each of the following narratives goes as if the imagined future has happened, and we watch it from the sidelines.

1. A Spiritual *Suq* in the Open Internet Spaces. After successful clinical trials in 2021, the vaccine became available globally, and soon public life in all countries started to go back to normal. Kazakhstan patented its own antiviral drug and removed restrictions on personal and social communication everywhere. Shopping and entertainment centers resumed their 24/7 work, celebration halls are again the venue for mass weddings and anniversaries *toys* (parties), Friday prayers gathered Muslims in all cities of Kazakhstan, and training courses in madrasahs at mosques welcomed new students. Imams resumed personal face-to-face meetings with the needy, and leading collective prayers brought back a sense of previously lost reality. In rural areas, mosques once again became centers of gatherings, and problems with the Internet faded away. However, COVID-19 could not but left its footprint on the life of humanity. Kazakhstani imams have felt this especially acutely in the past five years.

The fact is that during the quarantine almost all aspects of life moved into the virtual space. So the younger generation navigates searching engines promptly, getting answers to their questions instantly. The mobile Internet is an integral part of teenagers live and young people satisfy their needs through various sites, social networks, and applications. The spiritual realm follows the pattern. It has formed a "virtual market" where sheikhs / gurus / mentors / pastors of all stripes are present. In the Muslim sector of this *internet-suq*, one can find ideas varying from the radical to the reformist. Unfortunately, the former always looks more appealing and more professionally presented. This trend goes back to the days of ISIS' active Internet recruiting that engaged "aestheticization of violence" (Muzykina, 2016). Therefore, those imams who had a good command of modern technology, were present on social media, and created their own WhatsApp & Telegram groups during the quarantine; they became respected mentors for the youth. They taught young people to distinguish among inviting cries of "Internet barkers" actively advertising their spiritual "goods" on various sites.

However, the percentage of such imams was quite small for various reasons, e.g., the absence of the Internet in most rural areas, the lack of computers and free time to master modern technologies, and financial difficulties. As for the youth, there was a growing group whose underground activity included studying videos of organizations banned in Kazakhstan, reading their publications, and establishing special social networks. This activity resulted in *Islamdyk Zhangyru* (Islamic Revival), a protest movement that shocked everyone in 2025. Its members seized some mosques in the South Kazakhstan region. They demanded Shari'ah as state law, Islamic political parties, and gender-separate education in all educational institutions. Their actions were coordinated via messengers, and the group itself got thousands of supporters around the country. Local imams hardly knew about the upcoming riots and the spirit reigned in the virtual youth space. They failed to be spiritual guides and leaders.

2. IT-Tajdīd: the Kazakhstani Version. It is difficult to confirm that by 2030 social reality has completely returned to the pre-pandemic mode, but all restrictions have been removed, and people enjoying getting together and visiting public places freely. Due to the CRISPR technology, new vaccines could mutate along with the COVID viruses. Therefore, the population is optimistic about the threat of a new lockdown. However, the previous experience taught the Muslim ministers of Kazakhstan an important lesson that they learned.

The situation generated by the global pandemic in 2020 showed the bare readiness of imams in the Republic to continue serving under tough restrictions. Only because of the prompt reaction of the Spiritual Administration of

Muslims of Kazakhstan (SAMK) that launched training to improve the computer literacy of Muslim ministers, the situation stabilized and began to show positive results. In cooperation with Satbayev University, Kazakh-British Technical University, International IT University, and Karagandy State Technical University, the Institute of Imams Advanced Studies developed an intensive course of distance IT learning for imams. Skills in modern technologies for working with the Internet and social networks were included as mandatory for Muslim ministers' recertification. Each of them finally got free access to the Internet and a personal computer. That became possible due to donations from believers, Islamic banks of the Republic of Kazakhstan, and funds of new type donors.

The latter refers to *IT-Amanat Ltd.*, a company created by young Muslims who are fond of modern technologies but focus on halal Internet products. They develop Islam-backed programs in Kazakh, Russian, Arabic, and English languages, and their products were becoming very popular among international customers. The opening of a new technical department at Nur-Mubarak University in 2025 greatly facilitated such activities.

Because virtual reality has become an essential part of the Kazakhstanis everyday life, imams are actively conquering this space. All mosques have their websites and regularly publish updates sharing news of the Kazakhstani and world *ummah*, inviting visitors to open celebrations of Islamic holidays, and posting recorded Friday sermons. The format of video conferences with imams called "*Suragynyz bar ma? - Imamnan suranyz*" (Have a question? - Ask the imam) has gained remarkable popularity. Not only central mosques of Almaty, Nur-Sultan, and Shymkent hold such events, though they continue to lead in potential to invite famous theologians and scientists to their own broadcasting studios. However, among guest speakers, one can see specialists in various fields, e.g., Islamic economists and financiers, psychologists, philosophers, and others. Such active participation of Kazakhstani imams in the Internet space and the reformed attitude towards modern means of communication led to the fact that the previous extensive discourse on Islamic extremism, radicalism, and terrorism has practically died. *IT-tajdid* is reaping its good fruit.

3. Virtual Imam. Although scientists finished the research for an effective vaccine to stop COVID-19 in 2021, the world community enjoyed the encouraging results of the Moderna-Astra V only for a while. Because only rich and developed countries took advantage of the vaccine, in 2022, a new wave of the mutated virus swept the world, exacerbating the epidemiological situation in all regions. Central Asia was not excluded. Kazakhstan once again had to close its borders, introduced an emergency regime and strict quarantine measures. Supermarkets, bazaars, cultural and religious organizations were closed. Everything, including spiritual life, had to go online again. However, this time Kazakhstani imams were more prepared for such a collapse.

The previous three years helped to recognize the presence of a new reality in both the secular and spiritual spaces. The imams felt that the closure of mosques caused a real crack in the Kazakhstani *ummah*. The feeling of unity that was supported by live interaction, visitation, and Friday communal prayers disappeared. Many imams had to start actively use instant messengers and programs for Internet conferences. Some even had to buy a computer because smartphones functional capacities were not enough anymore. The SAMK and the Ministry of Social Development (the former Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan) took an active part in implementing this task. The second step was to provide all imams with access to the Internet. For this purpose, the Committee for Technical Support, created under the SAMK, concluded special agreements with Beeline and Vodafone, thus solving the painful issue. High-speed Internet entered homes of all imams in Kazakhstan.

Due to the mentioned actions, in 2030, several problems disappeared. Firstly, the advanced training courses at the Institute of Imams Advanced Studies increased the number of students' flows and subjects taught. Now the curriculum includes not only the basics of Internet literacy but also courses for advanced users. Today imams are actively posting their sermons and short videos on the YouTube channel, enlarging the Kazakh-speaking segment of the site. Second, technically matured imams have continued teaching courses at mosques during a new lockdown. These days they use traditional and interactive forms of education, preparing educational materials downloadable to any device. Courses participants communicate with their *ustāz* by Zoom, Skyteach, or Google team and in educational blogs. Thirdly, the young generation of Kazakhstani imams hold Internet forums regularly, where in addition to theological issues, participants discuss many other topics. Such events include virtual platforms for *nasheed* performers, the Qur'an reciters, cooking classes, calligraphy workshops, and many other forms of Muslim culture. The number of participants and visitors to such events is growing every time.

However, the most significant achievement of Kazakhstani imams over the last ten years is an interactive Internet portal firstly created by an initiative group in cooperation with some local and international educational institutions. This is *The Big Islamic Encyclopedia.KZ* that the users know as the “Virtual Imam.” Its content is overwhelming, varying from Islamic artifacts to the latest publications of modern Islamic scholars from all over the world. On the main page of the resource, the bot Azamat welcomes visitors and helps them navigate through topics and articles. The avatar of the bot copies an imam, his clothing, manners, and speech. Hyperlinks bring users to sources in the most famous academic institutions and libraries worldwide, and AI provides an instant translation of any document into one of seven user languages (Kazakh, Russian, English, Arabic, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Tajik). This platform has become the most popular source of information on Islam among modern users in Central Asia and even beyond because of the promotion work.

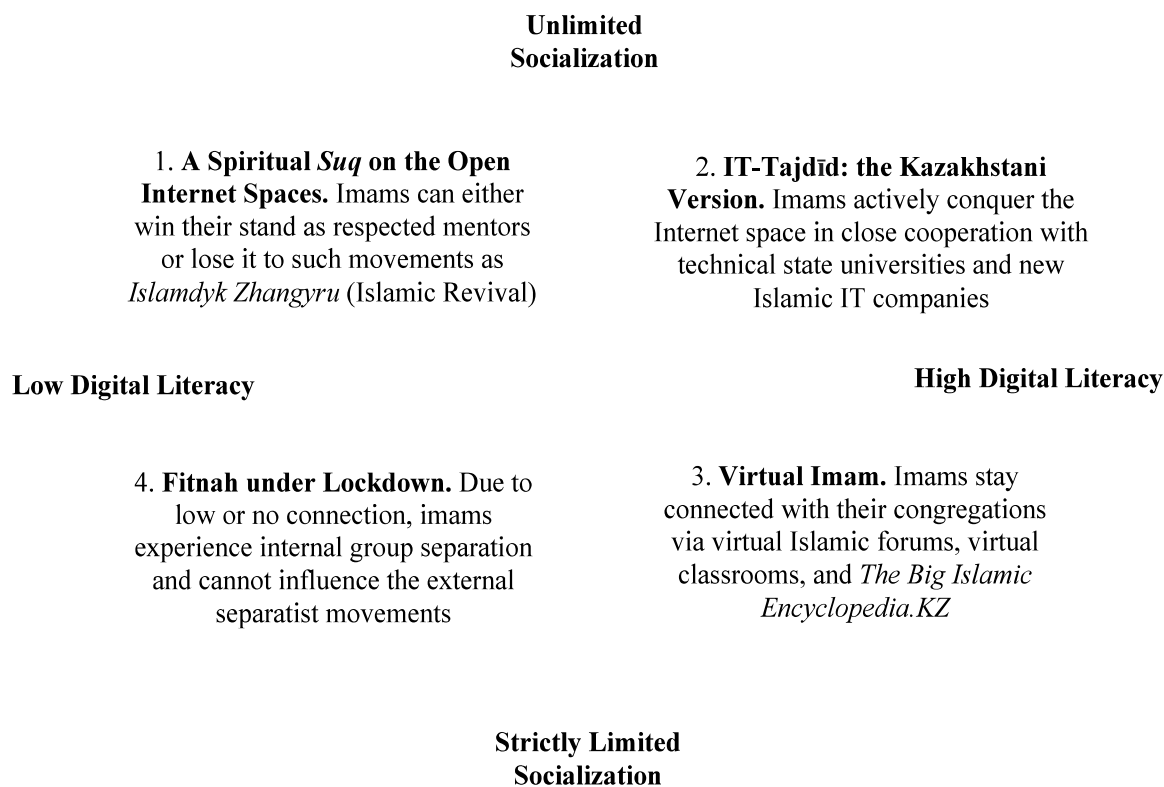
4. Fitnah under Lockdown. By the beginning of 2020, it became clear that the global community was in the deepest crisis on all fronts: the impact of COVID-19 was huge. Despite the regular sensational claims that the development of an effective vaccine is completed – they have started appearing in mass media since the end of 2020 – the real success was not achieved. The virus was mutating faster than medical professionals and scientists could complete their research and tests for new types of antiviral drugs. The massive outbreaks of infection keep happening globally, and it seems that no measures can stop this nightmare. In 2024, severe restrictive measures were introduced again in many countries around the world, including Kazakhstan.

This time the closure of mosques and prohibitions of religious gatherings split Kazakhstani Muslim ministers into two camps: some responded to a new round of lockdown as to an opportunity to have more time for self-education, family, strengthening *īmān* and *ummah*. Others insisted on the increasing risk of disconnection among believers and the loss of unity due to the growing wealth inequality. A critical factor in this confrontation was the lack of communication between the two groups. The only way to maintain any connection in society was the Internet and various messengers, but not all imams were experienced in working with these resources or had access. Therefore, the SAMK was not even aware of the issue since many trends had a narrow local nature. Finally, the rivalry gave rise to the *Ontustik Turkestan* (South Turkestan) party that called for removal of mosques in South Kazakhstan, Jambyl, Almaty, and East Kazakhstan from the SAMK jurisdiction.

Under the quarantine, isolation, and the poor Internet connection among imams, it is almost impossible to follow the conflict development. Contradictory information and numerous amateur videos are posted on the Internet. There is even some information about moving the armed forces to the country southern regions because this precedent created the hotbed for the external Islamist forces intervention. The confrontation keeps growing, and nobody knows how and when it will end.

## Conclusions

Applying the results of the survey, our attempts to co-design and co-create alternative futures resulted in four scenarios that are recapitulated in Chart 3:



**Chart 3:** Alternative Futures for Kazakhstani Imam

Summing up, we need to point out again that the future is open. It does not develop linearly and has many options. Our paper presents only four scenarios of alternative futures in which Kazakhstani imams play a critical role. We can consider each scenario as plausible with the reservation that the future is being created today. It means that the two uncertainties used for modeling must be completed with other factors for detailed development, e.g., trends, emerging issues, and driving forces (Schwartz, 1996). Moreover, following the rule of thumb, the human factor will seriously influence the coming events, disclosing the agency and influence of leaders. Whether the people involved in future modeling have a positive or negative view of the opening opportunities, whether they feel themselves agents or doomed victims of destiny, all these will shape the general picture.

At the same time, it is essential to distinguish among the alternative futures that look the most attractive to us, which we can call the “preferred future.” Prioritizing it, we can and should start changing the world around us now. What do we want to avoid? The impact of what needs to be minimized? What do we not want to see in our future? The answers to these questions must be embodied in actions that can draw the preferred future closer. Therefore, the main objective for doing future studies should be creating today as much of the upcoming reality as possible. We can achieve it by changing our actions and behaviors now.

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## Appendix

### Online Survey

#### HOW WERE THE IMAMS OF KAZAKHSTAN READY FOR THE SITUATION DEVELOPED UNDER COVID-19

**1. How has your ministry of imam changed due to COVID-19 and the quarantine?**

No change

Slightly changed

Seriously changed

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

**2. What has become the most difficult for you during the quarantine?**

Continue fulfilling my mission as an imam

Start using electronic means of social communication networks

Answer all in-coming calls

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

**3. What has changed in your life as an imam? (multiple answers)**

I have more time for self-education and reading special literature (*ahadith, tafsir*, etc.)

I have more time for reading and studying the Qur'an

I have more time for my family and relatives

I do more physical exercises now

I perform a longer *namaz* now

**4. What have you chosen as three main objectives for yourself as an imam during the quarantine?**

Sustain and strengthen my spiritual state as an imam

Continue communicating with people

Post sermons and video messages on YouTube

Continue to provide training for students of courses at the mosque

**5. What questions have drawn most of your attention during the quarantine?**

**(Multiple choice)**

Hygiene practices in Islam

Marital and family relations

Spiritual development

Issues of the Judgment Day and the end of the world

Correct observation of the pillars of Islam (*namaz, oraza*, etc.)

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

**6. What is most vital for you under the present situation?**

\_\_\_\_\_

**7. The current situation has revealed that you, as an imam, need more knowledge on the following subjects (multiple answers)**

*Aqidah*

*Fiqh*

Modern electronic means of communication

Arabic language

*Tafsir*

Psychology

*Tasawwuf*

Interpersonal communication

**8. Please, evaluate how changed the frequency of your usage of electronic means during the quarantine**

Started to use much more often

Learned new communication programs

Almost unchanged: use quite often

Almost unchanged: use quite rarely

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

**9. Is it possible to stay a Muslim communicating solely remotely / virtually?**

No, because \_\_\_\_\_

Yes, because \_\_\_\_\_

Not sure

**10. How will the quarantine influence the future of the Kazakhstani ummah?**

**General Information about Respondents**

Age Group:

20-30

31-40

41-50

51-60

61-70

**Place of Ministry:**

Nur-Sultan city

Almaty city

Akmola reg.

Aktobe reg.

Almaty reg.

Atyrau reg.

Eastern Kazakhstan reg.

Jambyl reg.

Western Kazakhstan reg.

Karagandy reg.

Kostanay reg.

Kyzylorda reg.

Mangistau reg.

Pavlodar reg.

North Kazakhstan reg.

Turkestan reg.

**Years of Ministry:**

Less than a year 1  
1-5 years  
6-10 years  
11-15 years  
16 -20 years  
21-25 years  
More than 25 year

**Size of the Mosque (number of attendees at Friday prayers):**

Less than 50 people  
50-100 people  
100-300 people  
300-500 people  
500-1000 people  
1000-1500 people  
1500-2000 people  
More than 2000 people

**The Highest Theological/Religious Educational Degree:**

Madrasah  
Training courses of the Institute of Imams' Advanced Studies of the RK  
Bh of Nur-Mubarak Islamic University  
MA of Nur-Mubarak Islamic University  
PhD of Nur-Mubarak Islamic University  
Bh Al-Azhar University  
MA Al-Azhar University  
Your answer \_\_\_\_\_