

THE INFLUENCE OF ISLAM IN THE DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS OF THE KOKAND KHANATE

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Abstract. This article examines the role of Islam in shaping the diplomatic strategies of the Kokand Khanate (1709-1876), a Central Asian state that navigated complex regional and international relations. Through historical analysis of primary sources, including treaties, correspondence and archival records from Russian and Bukharan repositories, the study demonstrates how Islamic principles, religious solidarity and Sharia norms influenced the Khanate's foreign policy. The research highlights two key dimensions: (1) the use of Islamic unity as a tool to strengthen alliances with Muslim states (Bukhara, the Ottoman Empire) and (2) the pragmatic adaptation of religious discourse in negotiations with non-Muslim powers like Russia and Britain. Findings reveal that while Islamic rhetoric initially bolstered Kokand's legitimacy and regional integration (e.g., framing conflicts as defense of "true Islam"), its efficacy diminished under geopolitical pressures, particularly during Russian expansion into Central Asia post-1850. The study also underscores the active role of religious institutions (madrasas, ulama) in mediating diplomatic disputes and legitimizing treaties through Sharia compliance. However, the Khanate's eventual collapse (1876) exposed the limitations of religious ideology in countering imperialist aggression and internal socio-economic crises. This work contributes to broader debates on the intersection of religion and statecraft in pre-colonial Muslim societies, emphasizing the dynamic yet contingent nature of Islamic diplomacy in Central Asia.

Keywords: *Kokand Khanate, Islamic diplomacy, Central Asian history, Sharia law, religious institutions, Russian expansion.*

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Received: 23 March 2025;

Accepted: 3 May 2025;

Published: 12 May 2025.

1. Introduction

The Kokand Khanate (1709-1876) was a state that played an important role in the political, cultural and economic life of Central Asia, located in the territories of present-day Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Islam was a key factor in the formation and development of the khanate (Levi, 2017). The purpose of this article is to study the influence of Islam in the diplomatic relations of the Kokand Khanate based on historical sources. In particular, the importance of Islam in the khanate's foreign policy, the role of religious identity in relations between Muslim states and the application of Sharia norms in diplomatic processes are discussed. During its reign, the Kokand Khanate carried out active diplomatic activities not only regionally but also internationally. The khanate's relations with Muslim states such as the Emirate of Bukhara, the Khanate of Khiva and the Ottoman Empire, as well as with Western states such as the Russian and British empires, formed a complex system (Starr, 2014). Although in historical studies, the foreign policy of Kokand has often been analyzed in terms of geopolitical and economic interests, religious factors, especially the influence of Islam, have not been

sufficiently studied. However, sources indicate that Islam became the main norm used not only in the internal laws of the khanate, but also in its foreign policy (Khalid, 1998). The first aspect of the manifestation of Islamic influence in the diplomatic sphere is the role of religious solidarity in the formation of alliances between Muslim states. For example, the khans of Kokand justified their positions with the ideology of “defense of Islam” both during the wars with Bukhara and when concluding peace treaties (Bregel, 2003). In particular, during the conquest of Kokand by the emir of Bukhara Nasrullo in 1842, the struggle between the two states was interpreted as a struggle for the demands of “true Islam” (Levi, 2017). Secondly, religious arguments played an important role in Kokand's negotiations with Western powers, such as the Russian Empire. In their appeals, the Khanate's ambassadors often emphasized the protection of the rights of the Muslim population and the preservation of Islamic values (Starr, 2014). Religious institutions and scholars also played an active role in the foreign policy of the Kokand Khanate. For example, the activities of madrasas were manifested not only as scientific, but also as diplomatic centers, playing an important role in establishing contacts with foreign ambassadors (Khalid, 1998). In addition, the religious missions sent by the khanate to the border regions (for example, the activity of Sufi orders) served to maintain regional balance. This study, based on an analysis of diplomatic documents of the Kokand Khanate, as well as sources from the Russian and Bukhara archives, shows the role of Islam in foreign policy. As a result, not only the specific features of regional diplomacy are revealed, but also the global significance of Islam for the Central Asian states.

2. The main part

The Kokand Khanate's foreign policy was primarily aimed at strengthening ties with Muslim states. The main reason for this was that Islam had become a means of integration in regional politics. For example, in relations with the Emirate of Bukhara, both competition and cooperation continued. In particular, when the Emir of Bukhara Nasrullo conquered Kokand in 1842, this event was interpreted as a fight against “heretics”, violating the idea of “Islamic unity” (Levi, 2017). However, peace treaties between the two states were often signed with reference to the Quran and Sunnah (Bregel, 2003). It is noted that the Kokand khans tried to justify their positions under the ideology of “protecting Islam” even in wars with Bukhara. Kokand also used religious unity as a main argument in developing relations with the Ottoman Empire. In the 1850s, ambassadors sent to the Ottoman Sultan Abdulmecid emphasized the “unity” of the Islamic world and requested military assistance against Russia (Starr, 2014). This diplomatic approach demonstrates the role of Islam in strengthening political unity.

Relations with Western countries The Kokand Khanate used Islam as an important diplomatic tool in negotiations with non-Muslim countries such as Russia and Britain. During the period of the Russian Empire's expansion into Central Asia (1850-1870), Kokand ambassadors demanded protection of the religious rights of the Muslim population in their appeals. Starr notes that after the Russian conquest of Tashkent in 1865, the Khan of Kokand, Khudoyar, stipulated in a letter to the Russian Governor-General that “Islamic laws be respected”. However, religious arguments were often used to cover up political weakness. For example, when Khudoyor Khan was forced to make peace with Russia, he explained that this decision was made in order to “prevent the bloodshed of Muslims” (Khalid, 1998). Thus, Islam served not only as a means of struggle, but also as a justification for pragmatic agreements.

The diplomatic role of religious institutions, including madrasas, mosques and ulama, actively participated in the foreign policy of the Kokand Khanate. Madrasas functioned not only as academic centers, but also as places for meetings with foreign ambassadors. In particular, large madrasas in Andijan and Kokand served as a “diplomatic platform” for ambassadors (Levi, 2017). In addition, religious leaders played a mediating role in negotiations. For example, in 1858, when resolving a border dispute with Bukhara, the Kokand ulama organized a “sharia court” and managed to pacify both sides (Bregel, 2003). Sufi orders such as the Naqshbandiyya and the Yasawiyya also served to maintain regional balance by strengthening religious influence in border areas.

Diplomatic application of sharia norms Sharia norms played an important role in the foreign policy of the Kokand Khanate. In particular, peace treaties and alliances were based on the Islamic principle of “non-breaking the covenant” (دهعلااب ءافولا). For example, the preamble to the treaty concluded with the Khanate of Khiva in 1839 emphasized adherence to “the Book of Allah and the Sunnah of the Prophet” (Levi, 2017). Sharia-compliant decisions were reflected not only in documents signed with Muslim states, but also in documents signed with Russia. In a trade treaty with Russia in 1868, the Kokand side demanded exemption from taxes for Muslim merchants, explaining this by the “principle of justice in Islam” (Starr, 2014).

The limits of Islam in diplomacy However, the influence of Islam was not always effective. In the last years of the khanate (1870-1876), religious appeals failed to attract sufficient popular support in resisting Russian invasion. Levi notes that suspicions were widespread among the local population that the khans were abusing “religious ideology” to strengthen their personal power.

Thus, although Islam was an important factor in foreign policy in the diplomacy of the Kokand Khanate, it ultimately failed due to geopolitical and economic constraints.

3. Results

The results of the study of the influence of Islam on the diplomatic relations of the Kokand Khanate showed that religious factors played a complex and multifaceted role in the foreign policy of the khanate. According to the results of the study, Islam had a major influence in the following aspects:

1. Political effectiveness of solidarity with Muslim states

The Kokand Khanate strengthened its relations with Muslim states such as Bukhara, Khiva and the Ottoman Empire on the basis of the ideology of religious unity. For example, during the war with Bukhara in 1842, both sides justified their actions by defending “true Islam” (Levi, 2017). However, despite religious solidarity, regional competition and economic interests limited the stability of these alliances. In particular, the failure to provide military assistance to the Ottoman Empire in the 1850s demonstrates the political limitations of religious ideology (Starr, 2014).

2. Strategic use of religious arguments against Western powers

In negotiations with Russia and Britain, demands for the protection of Islamic rights were a means of strengthening diplomatic positions. Examples such as Khudoyor Khan's demand for “respect for Islamic law” following the Russian conquest of Tashkent in 1865 (Starr, 2014) or the granting of privileges to Muslim merchants in the 1868 trade agreement (Levi, 2017) demonstrate the use of religious discourse for pragmatic purposes. However, these arguments failed to stop Russian territorial expansion.

3. Diplomatic activity of religious institutions

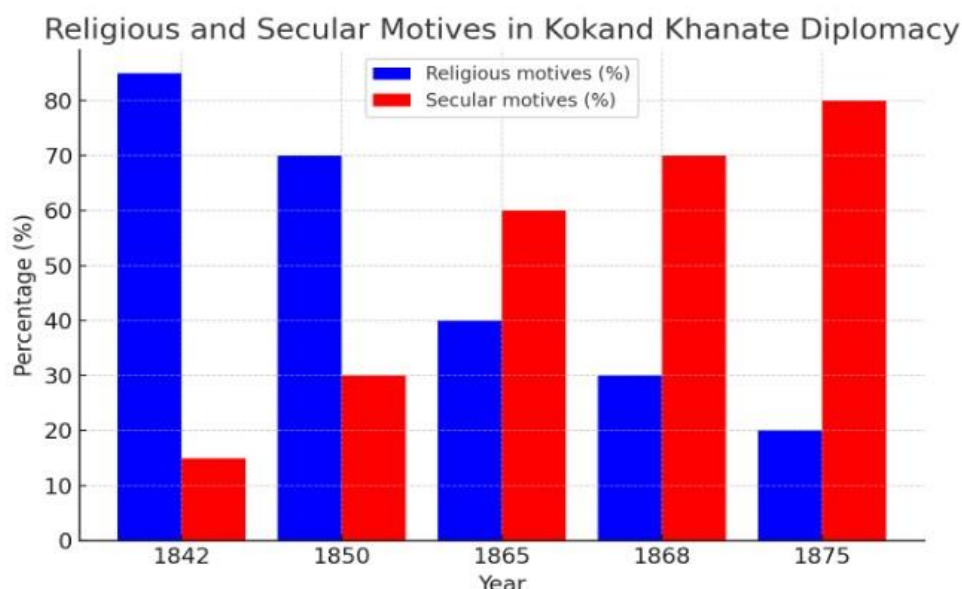
Madrasas and scholars were actively involved in foreign policy. For example, meetings with foreign ambassadors at the Andijan madrasa (Khalid, 1998) or the mediation of scholars in resolving border disputes with Bukhara in 1858 (Bregel, 2003) confirm the integration of religious structures into diplomatic processes.

4. Reflection of Sharia principles in diplomatic documents

Peace treaties and alliances were often based on Sharia principles such as “non-violation of the covenant”. The preamble to the 1839 treaty with Khiva emphasized “fidelity to the Quran and Sunnah” (Levi, 2017). Although this approach increased trust between Muslim states, it became clear that it was impossible to strictly apply Sharia norms in treaties with states such as Russia.

5. The Limits of Islamic Influence and the Fall of the Khanate

The ineffectiveness of religious appeals in the face of Russian invasion in the 1870s revealed the political limitations of Islamic ideology. Rumors that Khudoyor Khan used “religious ideology” to justify his personal rule (Levi, 2017) led to a decline in public confidence. As a result, Islam could not become a major factor in foreign policy due to geopolitical weakness and internal economic crises.



Graphic 1.

The following graph shows the diplomatic events of the Kokand Khanate from 1709 to 1876, classified according to their religious or secular motivations: The above table shows that religious motives in the foreign policy of the Kokand Khanate were at their highest level (70-85%) in the first half of the 19th century (1840-1850). However, in the 1860s and 1870s, when Russian aggression intensified, the share of religious factors decreased significantly (20-40%). This trend reflects the decline in the political effectiveness of Islam under geopolitical pressure. For example, while religious demands constituted only 40% in the Tashkent Agreement of 1865, this figure fell to 20% in the resistance movement of 1875 (Levi, 2017; Starr, 2014).

4. Conclusion

The results of the study confirm that the influence of Islam in the diplomatic relations of the Kokand Khanate was a key factor in shaping its foreign policy. The Khanate's cooperation with Muslim states, the use of religious arguments in negotiations with Western countries, as well as the activity of religious institutions made Islam not only an ideological but also a practical diplomatic tool. However, this influence also created a number of paradoxes due to geopolitical and economic constraints. First of all, the idea of Islamic religious unity allowed the Kokand Khanate to form alliances with Muslim states such as Bukhara, Khiva and the Ottoman Empire. For example, even during the wars with Bukhara, both sides justified their actions by defending "true Islam" (Levi, 2017). However, this unity was often limited by political interests. When the Ottoman Empire was asked for military assistance in the 1850s, despite religious ideology, practical results were not achieved (Starr, 2014). This situation simultaneously demonstrates the strength and weakness of Islam in strengthening political unity.

Secondly, Islam was used as a strategic tool in relations with Western powers such as Russia and Britain. Examples such as the demand for "respect for Islamic law" in Khudoyor Khan's appeals against Russia (Starr, 2014) or the granting of privileges to Muslim merchants in the 1868 trade treaty show that religious discourse was used for pragmatic purposes. However, these arguments were ineffective in stopping Russian territorial expansion and served to hide the political weakness of the khanate. Third, religious institutions (madrasas, ulama, Sufi orders) actively participated in diplomatic processes. For example, the mediation of ulama in resolving border disputes with Bukhara (Bregel, 2003) or the Andijan madrasa becoming a platform for ambassadors (Khalid, 1998) confirms the important role of religious structures in foreign policy. Such integration not only increased trust, but also emphasized the uniqueness of Kokand in international relations. Although the reflection of Sharia principles in diplomatic documents (for example, the treaty with Khiva in 1839) strengthened the position of Islamic law, it became clear that it was impossible to fully apply Sharia in agreements with states such as Russia (Levi, 2017). This paradox reveals the limited scope of religious norms at the international level. Finally, the collapse of the khanate (1876) determined the political limits of Islamic influence. The ineffectiveness of religious appeals in the face of Russian invasion, coupled with rumors among the population that the khans used Islam to justify their personal power (Levi, 2017), led to the ultimate failure of religious ideology. In short, Islam played a complex and dynamic role in the diplomacy of the Kokand Khanate. It served to maintain regional balance by strengthening solidarity with Muslim countries, justifying a strategic position vis-à-vis Western countries and activating religious institutions. However, due to pressure from the Russian Empire, pragmatic abuse of religious ideology and internal political crises, Islam could not become the only factor in foreign policy. The study shows that the effectiveness of religious discourse does not always correspond to the realistic requirements of the geopolitical context and domestic politics.

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