



THE VISITS OF OTTOMAN ENVOYS AND RELIGIOUS-CULTURAL
REPRESENTATIVES TO CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract: *This article examines the visits of Ottoman envoys and religious-cultural representatives to Central Asia during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, focusing on their political, religious, and cultural impact on the region. The study analyzes archival documents, diplomatic correspondence, travel records, and contemporary accounts to reconstruct the objectives, activities, and outcomes of these missions. It highlights how Ottoman representatives served as both diplomatic intermediaries and cultural emissaries, promoting administrative reforms, Islamic education, and transregional networks, while reinforcing Ottoman influence in the face of Russian expansion. The article demonstrates the reciprocal nature of these interactions, showing how Central Asian rulers and communities selectively engaged with Ottoman initiatives to advance local governance, religious cohesion, and cultural development. By situating these visits within the broader context of geopolitics, Islamic solidarity, and modernization, the study offers new insights into the multidimensional connections between the Ottoman Empire and Central Asia.*

Keywords: *Ottoman empire, central asia, envoys, religious representatives, diplomatic missions, islamic education, cultural exchange, bukhara, khiva, kokand*

INTRODUCTION

The late 19th and early 20th centuries represented a critical period in the history of Central Asia, marked by the encroachment of imperial powers, the modernization of local polities, and the intensification of transregional connections. Among the influential actors in this period were the Ottoman Empire and its representatives, who sought to assert political, religious, and cultural influence across the Muslim world. The visits of Ottoman envoys and religious-cultural representatives to Central Asia—encompassing the Bukhara, Khiva, and Kokand khanates—served as pivotal instruments through which the empire projected its soft power, facilitated diplomatic communication, and promoted ideological and educational networks. These missions were multidimensional, simultaneously addressing political negotiations, religious guidance, cultural dissemination, and the promotion of administrative reforms, thereby reinforcing both Ottoman authority and transregional Islamic solidarity.

Archival evidence indicates that Ottoman envoys undertook formal diplomatic missions to Central Asian courts, engaging directly with khans, local administrators, and elite scholars to negotiate treaties, mediate conflicts, and establish lines of communication with Istanbul. In parallel, religious and cultural representatives—including ulema, teachers, and scholars—conducted advisory visits to promote Islamic education, facilitate the establishment of madrasas, and transmit Ottoman religious, legal, and administrative



knowledge[1]. These initiatives were strategically designed to strengthen the Ottoman Empire's presence and influence in a region increasingly threatened by Russian expansion, while simultaneously fostering loyalty, cultural alignment, and ideological cohesion among Central Asian societies. The significance of these visits extends beyond mere diplomatic formality.

Ottoman envoys and religious-cultural figures actively participated in intellectual and cultural exchanges, introducing Ottoman legal codes, educational curricula, and administrative practices that were selectively adopted and adapted by local authorities. Through the dissemination of ideas, correspondence, and scholarly networks, these missions created channels for ongoing engagement between Central Asia and the broader Islamic world, allowing local rulers and religious elites to reinforce their legitimacy, modernize governance structures, and maintain social cohesion.

The visits also facilitated the integration of Central Asian polities into transregional networks, contributing to the circulation of religious scholarship, political thought, and cultural practices across Eurasia. Moreover, the visits of Ottoman representatives were not unidirectional; they involved negotiation, adaptation, and selective adoption of Ottoman models by Central Asian actors. The khanates exercised considerable agency, balancing the benefits of Ottoman support with the imperative to maintain sovereignty and respond to Russian pressures. Local rulers, scholars, and religious leaders strategically engaged with Ottoman initiatives, utilizing the resources, knowledge, and legitimacy they provided to strengthen internal governance, foster social cohesion, and advance educational and religious reforms. This complex interplay between Ottoman initiative and local adaptation underscores the reciprocal nature of the interactions and highlights the nuanced mechanisms through which influence, authority, and cultural transmission were operationalized in Central Asia[2]. The visits of Ottoman envoys and religious-cultural representatives to Central Asia were multifaceted engagements that combined diplomacy, religious guidance, cultural exchange, and administrative support. They played a crucial role in shaping political, religious, and intellectual life in the Bukhara, Khiva, and Kokand khanates, facilitating transregional connectivity, and reinforcing Ottoman influence within a rapidly transforming geopolitical and cultural landscape. Understanding these visits provides a nuanced perspective on the dynamics of Central Asia–Ottoman relations, the strategies of empire in exercising soft power, and the adaptive responses of local actors navigating complex political, cultural, and ideological environments.

The study of the visits of Ottoman envoys and religious-cultural representatives to Central Asia during the late 19th and early 20th centuries holds profound historical, political, and cultural significance, particularly within the context of understanding transregional interactions in the Muslim world. This period was characterized by the intensification of imperial pressures, notably the expansion of the Russian Empire into Central Asia, which challenged the political autonomy, social cohesion, and cultural identity of the Bukhara, Khiva, and Kokand khanates. The Ottoman Empire's engagement, therefore, represents a critical example of how a transregional Islamic power sought to project influence, support local governance, and promote religious and cultural cohesion in the face of external pressures. Understanding these interactions illuminates the



mechanisms through which empires exercised soft power, utilized diplomacy, and fostered ideological and educational networks to achieve both strategic and cultural objectives[3]. From a historical perspective, examining these visits allows scholars to trace the development of Ottoman-Central Asian relations, shedding light on the ways in which the khanates navigated a complex geopolitical environment. Ottoman envoys and religious-cultural representatives were not only carriers of diplomatic and administrative knowledge but also agents of cultural and ideological exchange. Their activities facilitated the transfer of Ottoman administrative practices, educational curricula, and religious scholarship, which contributed to the modernization of governance structures, the reinforcement of Islamic identity, and the strengthening of social cohesion within Central Asian societies. This dual role—combining diplomacy with cultural and religious influence—underscores the multifaceted nature of Ottoman engagement, revealing a sophisticated approach to empire-building and transregional connectivity. Moreover, the topic is highly relevant for understanding the dynamics of agency and adaptation in historical interactions. Central Asian rulers, scholars, and religious elites actively negotiated the terms of engagement with Ottoman representatives, selectively appropriating administrative models, educational systems, and religious guidance to suit local political and social conditions. This reciprocal process highlights the interplay between external influence and local adaptation, offering valuable insights into the strategies of negotiation, resistance, and selective modernization that shaped the region's political and cultural evolution. In contemporary terms, analyzing the visits of Ottoman envoys and religious-cultural figures provides a framework for understanding enduring patterns of transregional connectivity, the role of Islamic identity in diplomacy, and the historical precedents for cultural exchange and institutional collaboration across Eurasia. It also contributes to broader scholarly debates on the nature of empire, soft power, and transnational networks in the Muslim world, offering lessons on how historical actors navigated competing pressures while maintaining sovereignty, cultural continuity, and social cohesion[4]. The relevance of this topic lies in its ability to illuminate the political, cultural, and religious dimensions of Ottoman-Central Asian interactions, to deepen our understanding of empire and transregional networks, and to provide critical insights into the strategies of influence, negotiation, and adaptation that have shaped the historical trajectory of Central Asia within the broader Islamic world.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries marked a pivotal era in Central Asian history, characterized by significant geopolitical shifts and cultural exchanges. During this period, the Russian Empire expanded its influence into Central Asia, incorporating the khanates of Bukhara, Khiva, and Kokand into its sphere of control. This expansion posed challenges to the region's political autonomy and cultural identity. In response to these developments, the Ottoman Empire, as the leading Islamic power and the holder of the caliphate, sought to maintain its influence in the Muslim world. One of the strategies employed was the dispatch of envoys and religious-cultural representatives to Central Asia. These missions aimed to reinforce Islamic solidarity, promote cultural ties, and counterbalance Russian influence in the region. Statistical data on the exact number of Ottoman missions to Central Asia during this period is limited. However, historical

records indicate that such missions were not infrequent. For instance, in the early 19th century, the Ottoman Empire sent several diplomatic and religious delegations to the Bukhara Emirate, Khiva Khanate, and Kokand Khanate[5]. These missions facilitated the exchange of knowledge, religious texts, and cultural practices between the Ottoman Empire and Central Asia. The significance of these missions lies not only in their diplomatic and religious objectives but also in their role in fostering cultural and intellectual exchanges. They contributed to the dissemination of Ottoman administrative practices, legal frameworks, and educational systems in Central Asia. Moreover, these interactions helped to strengthen the shared Islamic identity among the Muslim populations of the region. In conclusion, the visits of Ottoman envoys and religious-cultural representatives to Central Asia during the late 19th and early 20th centuries were instrumental in maintaining and enhancing the Ottoman Empire's influence in the region[6]. They served as a means to promote Islamic unity, facilitate cultural exchanges, and counteract the encroachment of foreign powers. Understanding these historical interactions provides valuable insights into the dynamics of empire, religion, and culture in the Muslim world during this period.

The scholarly discourse surrounding the visits of Ottoman envoys and religious-cultural representatives to Central Asia during the late 19th and early 20th centuries reveals a nuanced debate between historians regarding the extent, nature, and impact of Ottoman influence in the region. Zumrad Rakhmonkulova, a leading scholar on transregional Islamic networks, argues that the Ottoman missions to Bukhara, Khiva, and Kokand were deliberate instruments of soft power aimed at consolidating Ottoman authority and fostering pan-Islamic solidarity in a region increasingly threatened by Russian expansion. Rakhmonkulova emphasizes that these envoys and religious representatives were not mere ceremonial figures; rather, they actively engaged in diplomacy, educational initiatives, and religious guidance, thereby shaping the institutional, intellectual, and socio-political landscapes of the khanates[7]. According to her analysis, Ottoman representatives facilitated the establishment of madrasas patterned after Ottoman curricula, introduced administrative and legal knowledge, and provided ideological reinforcement that strengthened local rulers' legitimacy while aligning Central Asian societies with broader Islamic networks. She contends that this engagement was strategic, mutually beneficial, and central to the Ottoman Empire's efforts to maintain influence in distant yet culturally significant territories. In contrast, Abduvali Berdiev offers a more critical perspective that foregrounds the agency of the Central Asian khanates and religious elites, arguing that Ottoman influence was largely mediated and selectively appropriated by local actors. Berdiev posits that Bukhara, Khiva, and Kokand were not passive recipients of Ottoman guidance; rather, they actively negotiated the terms of engagement to serve their own political, social, and religious objectives[8]. He underscores that while Ottoman envoys introduced models of governance, education, and religious practice, these models were adapted, modified, or even resisted in accordance with local priorities, traditional authority structures, and the exigencies of responding to Russian imperial pressures. Berdiev further highlights cases in which Central Asian rulers utilized Ottoman support to enhance their own legitimacy without fully ceding

autonomy, illustrating a dynamic of reciprocity and strategic collaboration rather than unilateral influence. The juxtaposition of Rakhmonkulova's and Berdiev's analyses reveals the multidimensional nature of Ottoman-Central Asian interactions, emphasizing the interplay between external projection of influence and local adaptation[9]. While Rakhmonkulova highlights the strategic and cohesive role of Ottoman missions in promoting ideological, educational, and administrative transformation, Berdiev draws attention to the selective agency exercised by the khanates, demonstrating that influence was negotiated, conditional, and context-dependent. This scholarly debate underscores that Ottoman engagement in Central Asia cannot be reduced to simple narratives of domination or cultural diffusion; instead, it constituted a complex process in which both Ottoman and Central Asian actors exercised power, negotiated authority, and co-constructed frameworks for political governance, religious practice, and cultural exchange[10]. Ultimately, this polemic illustrates the centrality of reciprocal negotiation, adaptation, and selective adoption in shaping the historical outcomes of Ottoman missions to Central Asia. By integrating these divergent perspectives, scholars can better understand the multidimensional nature of transregional interactions, the mechanisms of soft power in the Muslim world, and the ways in which Central Asian societies navigated the overlapping pressures of imperial encroachment, religious solidarity, and cultural modernization, resulting in a historically significant legacy that influenced subsequent developments in governance, education, and religious life across the region.

Conclusion: The visits of Ottoman envoys and religious-cultural representatives to Central Asia during the late 19th and early 20th centuries were a multifaceted phenomenon that significantly shaped the political, cultural, and religious landscape of the Bukhara, Khiva, and Kokand khanates.

These missions exemplified a sophisticated form of transregional engagement in which the Ottoman Empire projected influence through diplomacy, educational initiatives, and religious guidance, while local actors exercised agency, negotiating and selectively adopting Ottoman practices to serve internal governance, social cohesion, and cultural continuity.

The dual role of these representatives—both as instruments of Ottoman soft power and as conduits for cultural and religious exchange—highlighted the complex interplay between external authority and local adaptation.

Politically, the presence of Ottoman envoys strengthened diplomatic networks, facilitated the negotiation of treaties, and contributed to administrative reforms, enhancing the legitimacy and governance capacity of local rulers.

Religiously and culturally, Ottoman scholars and educators promoted Islamic education, established connections between Central Asian and Ottoman madrasas, and fostered intellectual and theological exchanges, reinforcing Islamic identity and pan-Islamic solidarity across the region.

These interactions also created transregional channels that allowed for the circulation of ideas, administrative practices, and cultural norms, providing the khanates with tools to modernize institutions while maintaining traditional structures.

The scholarly debate between Zumrad Rakhmonkulova and Abduvali Berdiev illustrates that the impact of these visits cannot be understood as unilateral; rather, it was the product of dynamic negotiation, reciprocal influence, and selective adaptation. While Ottoman initiatives provided models, resources, and ideological frameworks, the khanates exercised considerable discretion, ensuring that external guidance complemented local priorities and strategic needs.

This reciprocal engagement underscores the importance of analyzing both the transmitting and receiving actors in the study of transregional influence. In conclusion, the Ottoman missions to Central Asia played a crucial role in shaping the political, cultural, and religious development of the Bukhara, Khiva, and Kokand khanates. They facilitated diplomatic engagement, reinforced Islamic education and religious cohesion, and contributed to the modernization and stabilization of governance structures.

The historical significance of these visits lies in their ability to illustrate the complex mechanisms of influence, negotiation, and adaptation that defined transregional relations, offering enduring insights into the ways empires and local societies interacted, collaborated, and co-constructed systems of authority and cultural continuity in the Muslim world.

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