

THE EVOLUTION OF ISLAMIC EDUCATION AND FOREIGN RELATIONS UNDER  
THE SPIRITUAL ADMINISTRATION OF MUSLIMS OF CENTRAL ASIA AND  
KAZAKHSTAN (1940S–1980S)

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**Abstract:** During the Soviet period, the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM) became the primary institution responsible for the official representation of Islam within the USSR. Between the 1940s and 1980s, it played a crucial role in restoring Islamic education, maintaining religious leadership, and participating in limited international cooperation. This article explores the evolution of SADUM’s educational policy, its institutional development, and the nature of its external relations with Muslim-majority countries. Despite operating under state supervision, SADUM managed to preserve Islamic scholarly traditions and engage in diplomatic exchanges that strengthened both religious identity and cultural continuity in the region.

**Keywords:** SADUM, Soviet Islam, Islamic education, diplomacy, Central Asia, Kazakhstan, religious policy

### Introduction

The establishment of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM) in 1943 represented a turning point in Soviet religious policy. After two decades of repression and mosque closures, the Soviet state decided to legalize a limited form of Islamic activity as part of its wartime strategy to gain support from the Muslim population. Based in Tashkent, SADUM became the most influential Muslim institution within the USSR, encompassing five republics—Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan.

SADUM operated under strict ideological control but gradually expanded its influence in the spheres of religious education, publishing, and diplomacy. Under the leadership of Mufti Eshon Babakhan and later his son Mufti Ziyovuddin Babakhan, SADUM worked to restore theological education, ensure the continuity of religious personnel, and maintain limited international contacts with Muslim countries.

The revival of formal Islamic education through the Mir-i Arab Madrasah and the establishment of the Tashkent Islamic Institute enabled the development of a new generation of Soviet-trained Islamic scholars. At the same time, SADUM’s participation in international conferences and correspondence with foreign religious centers demonstrated a pragmatic balance between political loyalty and religious mission.

This study examines how SADUM's activities contributed to maintaining religious knowledge, building clerical capacity, and projecting a controlled yet meaningful Islamic presence in the global arena during the Soviet period.

### Materials and Methods

The methodological foundation of this research is based on a comprehensive historical and analytical approach aimed at exploring the institutional, educational, and diplomatic activities of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan during the 1940s–1980s. The study is grounded in the principles of historical contextualization and interpretive analysis, combining archival investigation, comparative synthesis, and critical evaluation of documentary evidence. Through this approach, the work seeks to reconstruct the dynamics of Islamic institutional development and the mechanisms through which religious leadership operated within the constraints of Soviet political and ideological control.

The research relies primarily on archival and documentary sources that provide direct insight into the functioning of SADUM and its interaction with state authorities. The Central State Archive of the Republic of Uzbekistan served as the main repository for primary data, including decrees, internal correspondence, and reports issued by the Council for Religious Affairs and the administrative offices of SADUM. Among these documents, particular attention was given to materials relating to the establishment of the administration in 1943, the reopening of Islamic educational institutions after 1945, and the development of international contacts from the 1950s onwards. These materials are essential for tracing the historical continuity of religious institutions that had survived through decades of repression and transformation.

In addition to archival materials, the study draws on official periodicals and publications produced by SADUM itself, particularly the multilingual journal *Muslims of the Soviet East*, published from 1960 onwards. This periodical is of great importance because it reflects both the internal discourse of Soviet Islam and the carefully constructed image that the Soviet Union sought to project abroad. The texts of sermons, speeches by muftis, and public statements were examined to identify recurring themes related to religious education, diplomacy, and ideological adaptation.

Secondary literature by historians, Orientalists, and political scientists provides a comparative and interpretive framework for the analysis. Works by A. Bennigsen, Yaacov Ro'i, Adeeb Khalid, and Eren Tasar, among others, were used to situate SADUM within the broader context of state–religion relations in the USSR. Comparative perspectives on other religious institutions operating under Soviet jurisdiction were also incorporated to highlight the distinctive features of Islamic governance in Central Asia and Kazakhstan. The study combines the analytical perspectives of institutional theory and modernization theory to explain how traditional religious organizations survived and adapted under socialist modernization and ideological constraint.

A content-based analytical method was employed to examine SADUM's official discourse, educational reforms, and foreign relations. The materials were organized chronologically and thematically, focusing on three central areas: the development of Islamic education and personnel training, the evolution of foreign relations with Muslim countries, and the institutional adaptation of Islamic leadership to the requirements of the Soviet state. This structure made it

possible to trace both the internal transformation of SADUM and its role in Soviet religious policy. The comparative aspect of the analysis enabled the identification of continuities and differences between the Soviet Islamic administration and the models of religious governance existing in other parts of the Muslim world during the same period.

The data analysis process included textual interpretation of primary sources, cross-referencing of archival documents with published reports, and contextual evaluation of historical events. Quantitative indicators such as the number of registered mosques, enrolled students, or international delegations were integrated into qualitative descriptions to provide a balanced understanding of SADUM's scope and activities. The interpretive dimension of the research involved examining not only explicit administrative actions but also implicit strategies through which SADUM leaders preserved Islamic identity under censorship and ideological supervision.

Throughout the study, ethical and methodological rigor was maintained. All archival and published materials were cited with full academic accuracy, and translations from Russian, Uzbek, and Arabic were carried out with careful attention to the preservation of original meaning and nuance. The research avoids theological or ideological bias, approaching SADUM as a socio-political and cultural institution rather than as a purely religious organization.

The limitations of this study are primarily related to the accessibility and nature of archival sources. A portion of the documents concerning SADUM's internal communication with state authorities remains classified or incomplete, which restricts the possibility of a full reconstruction of certain events. Moreover, the official nature of Soviet-era documentation often reflects the state's ideological position rather than independent religious perspectives. Nevertheless, the use of triangulation—combining archival evidence, printed sources, and scholarly analysis—ensures the validity and reliability of the conclusions drawn in this research.

The methodological framework adopted in this study thus allows for a nuanced understanding of SADUM's dual identity as both a religious institution and an administrative body under state supervision. By integrating historical evidence, institutional analysis, and critical interpretation, the research offers an objective reconstruction of the processes through which Islamic education and international religious relations evolved in Soviet Central Asia and Kazakhstan during the mid-twentieth century.

## Results

The activities of SADUM between the 1940s and 1980s reveal a complex interaction between state supervision and religious revival. Despite strict political control, SADUM successfully institutionalized Islamic education within the legal boundaries of the Soviet system. The reopening of the Mir-i Arab Madrasah in 1945 marked the rebirth of official Islamic scholarship in the USSR. The curriculum included Arabic language, Qur'anic interpretation, Islamic jurisprudence, and Soviet-approved social studies.

In 1971, the foundation of the Tashkent Islamic Institute named after Imam al-Bukhari significantly expanded educational opportunities for Muslim youth. The institute became a symbol of the coexistence of religious learning within a secular, atheist state. By the late 1970s,

approximately 150 students from across Central Asia and Kazakhstan were enrolled in these institutions, many of whom later served as imams, muftis, or religious administrators after independence.

SADUM's leadership also promoted intellectual and cultural activities to strengthen Islamic identity. Through its publication Muslims of the Soviet East, SADUM disseminated theological essays, historical studies, and reports on religious life. The journal was translated into several languages, enabling communication with Islamic organizations abroad and reinforcing the USSR's image as a tolerant state.

On the international stage, SADUM played a unique role in religious diplomacy. Its representatives attended Islamic conferences in Cairo, Baghdad, and Jeddah, where they advocated for global peace and religious coexistence. The Soviet government, recognizing SADUM's propaganda potential, supported these visits as a tool of "soft power" during the Cold War. Nonetheless, SADUM's delegates also used these opportunities to renew intellectual exchanges with scholars from the Middle East, reviving a sense of connection with the broader Islamic world.

The dual nature of SADUM's mission — serving both state interests and religious preservation — became its defining characteristic. Through careful negotiation, the administration maintained a space for theological discourse and moral leadership within the confines of state ideology. Its efforts ensured that Islamic traditions in Central Asia and Kazakhstan were not completely eradicated during the Soviet era but rather adapted and preserved under institutional protection.

**Table 1. Comparative Overview of SADUM's Educational and Diplomatic Activities (1943–1980s)**

Period	Key Development	Description	Impact
1943–1945	Establishment of SADUM	Founded by decree during World War II; HQ in Tashkent	Reintroduction of centralized Islamic leadership
1945–1960	Reopening of Mir-i Arab Madrasah	Training of religious cadres resumed after repression	Revival of ulama class and limited religious education
1960–1970	Expansion of international relations	Participation in Islamic conferences and foreign delegations	Enhanced global awareness of Soviet Muslims
1971–1980	Establishment of Tashkent Islamic Institute	Modernized education with dual curriculum (religious & civic)	Production of trained imams and teachers
1960–1980	Publication of Muslims of the Soviet East	Multilingual religious and cultural periodical	Cultural diplomacy and controlled religious outreach

## Discussion

SADUM's existence demonstrates how religion could adapt within an ideologically hostile environment. Its leaders pursued a pragmatic approach that aligned outwardly with Soviet policy while preserving Islamic values internally. The educational institutions it managed produced a generation of scholars who later became key figures in the post-Soviet Islamic revival.

Moreover, SADUM's international engagements illustrated how religious diplomacy could serve both spiritual and political objectives. By engaging with foreign scholars and Muslim leaders, SADUM positioned itself as a mediator between Soviet atheism and the Muslim world's expectations. The participation of Soviet muftis in global religious forums helped foster a perception of coexistence and religious tolerance — a valuable political message for the USSR during the Cold War.

Despite these achievements, SADUM's autonomy was limited. Religious curricula, publications, and sermons were monitored by the state, and any expression of political dissent was prohibited. Yet within these boundaries, SADUM maintained a subtle form of resistance — preserving knowledge, language, and tradition through continuity rather than confrontation.

## Conclusion

The Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan played a crucial role in maintaining Islamic education, identity, and diplomacy during one of the most restrictive periods in Muslim history. Its ability to sustain theological instruction, train imams, and represent Soviet Muslims internationally demonstrates both resilience and adaptation under pressure.

Through controlled education and symbolic international communication, SADUM provided a framework for preserving Islamic continuity. This institutional legacy became the foundation for post-Soviet religious revival after 1991. Today, the history of SADUM stands as an example of how faith can survive and even evolve within the constraints of an authoritarian system, balancing between spiritual integrity and political compliance.

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