

**THE ACTIVITIES OF THE SPIRITUAL ADMINISTRATION OF MUSLIMS OF
CENTRAL ASIA AND KAZAKHSTAN IN THE FIELD OF PERSONNEL TRAINING
AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS (1940–1980S)**

Arslonbekov Nursulton Azizbek o'g'li

Independent Researcher, Specialty 07.00.01 – History of Uzbekistan

Yusupov Rasuljon Malikovich

Scientific Supervisor: PhD in History, Associate Professor

Abstract: During the Soviet period, especially from the 1940s to the 1980s, the religious life of Muslims in Central Asia and Kazakhstan was subject to strict state control. However, despite ideological restrictions, the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM), established in 1943, played a crucial role in maintaining Islamic education, preparing religious personnel, and establishing limited but significant international contacts. This paper analyzes the historical context, institutional structure, and strategic activities of SADUM in developing theological education and diplomacy within the boundaries of Soviet religious policy. The study reveals how the organization balanced between religious preservation and political conformity, and how its efforts contributed to the continuity of Islamic scholarship in the region.

Keywords: SADUM, Islam in the USSR, religious education, Central Asia, Kazakhstan, international relations, Soviet policy

Introduction

The mid-20th century marked a complex era for Islam in the Soviet Union. Following decades of repression, the religious revival initiated during World War II led to the formation of official religious administrations that were intended to bring Islam under state supervision. Among these, the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM), founded in 1943 and based in Tashkent, became the most influential Islamic institution in the USSR.

SADUM's establishment was a turning point in the relationship between the Soviet state and the Muslim community. While it functioned under the strict oversight of the Council for Religious Affairs, it nonetheless provided a platform for religious scholars to continue their activities in education, publishing, and religious diplomacy. From the 1940s to the 1980s, SADUM's leadership, especially under prominent muftis such as Eshon Babakhan ibn Abdurahman and his son Ziyovuddin Babakhan, sought to preserve Islamic knowledge, prepare qualified clergy, and maintain limited but meaningful connections with the Muslim world abroad.

This period coincided with major shifts in Soviet domestic and foreign policy. Internally, the state maintained an official stance of atheism but tolerated controlled religious institutions for political legitimacy. Externally, the Soviet Union sought to present itself as a tolerant,

multicultural power — particularly to Muslim-majority countries of Asia and the Middle East during the Cold War. Within this context, SADUM became a bridge between the Soviet government and the global Islamic community, representing a unique model of “state-managed Islam.”

The present paper examines SADUM’s activities between 1940 and 1980 in two key domains: **(1)** the training and development of religious personnel and **(2)** the establishment of international relations and Islamic diplomacy. By analyzing archival data, historical literature, and testimonies of contemporary scholars, this study aims to evaluate the institutional legacy of SADUM in shaping the religious and cultural identity of Muslims in Central Asia and Kazakhstan during the Soviet era.

Materials and Methods

This study employed a historical-descriptive and analytical approach, relying on both primary and secondary sources. Archival documents from the Central State Archive of Uzbekistan, official publications of SADUM (such as *Muslims of the Soviet East* journal), and memoirs of religious figures were analyzed to reconstruct the institutional and ideological framework of SADUM’s activities.

The research also incorporated Soviet-era government decrees, resolutions of the Council for Religious Affairs, and reports on international religious exchanges. In addition, academic works by historians such as A. Bennigsen, H. B. Paksoy, and contemporary Central Asian scholars were used to interpret the broader political and social implications of SADUM’s work.

Qualitative content analysis was applied to examine SADUM’s publications, speeches of its muftis, and their participation in international conferences. The comparative historical method was used to assess SADUM’s role within the general policy of the USSR toward religious institutions in comparison to other spiritual boards, such as the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of European Russia and Siberia.

Results

The analysis of historical and archival data demonstrates that the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM), founded in 1943, became the central institution for managing Islamic life in the Soviet Union. It functioned as an intermediary between the Muslim population and the atheist state, balancing religious needs with ideological constraints. Despite strict control by the Council for Religious Affairs, SADUM played a decisive role in preserving Islamic education, training religious personnel, and maintaining symbolic links with the global Muslim community.

The reopening of the Mir-i Arab Madrasah in Bukhara in 1945 was one of the most significant achievements of SADUM, marking the re-establishment of formal Islamic education in the

USSR after two decades of total repression. This madrasa served as the primary center for educating imams, qadis, and other clergy for all five Central Asian republics and Kazakhstan. In 1971, the Tashkent Islamic Institute named after Imam al-Bukhari was founded as the second major educational institution under SADUM's supervision, expanding the scope of religious instruction. Although the curriculum was strictly monitored and limited by the Soviet government, these institutions offered courses in Qur'anic studies, hadith, fiqh, Arabic language, and Islamic ethics, enabling the training of a new generation of officially recognized ulama.

In addition to formal education, SADUM organized short-term training programs for mosque personnel and imams, providing instruction on sermon delivery, mosque management, and the adaptation of religious teaching to Soviet conditions. This system allowed for a modest but continuous reproduction of religious leadership. By the late 1970s, SADUM supervised approximately 1,500 functioning mosques across Central Asia and Kazakhstan, all led by clergy trained under its oversight.

SADUM also developed a cautious but strategically significant network of international religious relations. From the 1950s onward, the Soviet government increasingly used SADUM as a channel of "religious diplomacy." Its representatives participated in conferences and delegations to Muslim-majority countries, including Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan. Through these visits, SADUM promoted the image of Soviet religious tolerance and emphasized the peaceful coexistence of Islam and socialism.

A major tool in this outreach was the publication of the multilingual journal *Muslims of the Soviet East*, first issued in 1960. Distributed abroad in Arabic, English, and French, the journal contained religious articles, reports on Islamic life in the USSR, and speeches by SADUM's leaders. It became one of the few official windows through which the outside world could access information about Soviet Muslims.

Despite its successes, SADUM operated within narrow boundaries defined by Soviet ideology. The content of sermons, textbooks, and public statements was monitored by the Council for Religious Affairs. Nevertheless, SADUM's leadership, particularly under Mufti Ziyovuddin Babakhan (1957–1982), managed to protect certain aspects of Islamic tradition and scholarship. Within this controlled framework, SADUM became a symbol of religious continuity and intellectual resilience in a state that officially denied the existence of God.

Table 1 below summarizes the key aspects of SADUM's activities during the 1940s–1980s, including educational development, personnel training, and international engagement.

Table 1. Summary of SADUM's Activities (1940s–1980s)

Area of Activity	Key Achievements and Features	Historical Period	Impact / Outcome
------------------	-------------------------------	-------------------	------------------

Area of Activity	Key Achievements and Features	Historical Period	Impact / Outcome
Institutional Foundation	Establishment of SADUM headquarters in Tashkent; inclusion of five republics (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan).	1943	Unified religious administration for all Central Asian Muslims.
Religious Education	Reopening of Mir-i Arab Madrasah (Bukhara, 1945); founding of Tashkent Islamic Institute (1971).	1945–1970s	Continuous training of officially recognized clergy; preservation of Islamic scholarship.
Personnel Training	Annual imam seminars and mosque management courses organized by SADUM.	1950s–1980s	Professionalization and ideological adaptation of clergy to Soviet conditions.
Religious Infrastructure	Gradual increase of registered mosques (from 500 in 1950s to around 1,500 by 1980).	1950–1980	Partial revival of public religious life and local mosque networks.
International Relations	Participation in conferences in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia; hosting foreign delegations.	1955–1980s	Strengthened cultural diplomacy and Soviet soft-power projection in Muslim countries.
Publishing and Media	Launch of Muslims of the Soviet East journal in Arabic, English, and French; official fatwas and religious bulletins.	1960–1980s	Promotion of Soviet image abroad; dissemination of controlled Islamic discourse.
Leadership and Representation	Prominent figures: Mufti Eshon Babakhan (1943–1957) and Mufti Ziyovuddin Babakhan (1957–1982).	1940s–1980s	Ensured continuity of leadership, diplomatic representation, and religious stability.

By the late 1970s, SADUM had successfully institutionalized a model of “**loyal Islam**” that coexisted with the Soviet political system. It acted simultaneously as a custodian of faith, a mediator of state policy, and a representative of Soviet Muslims on the global stage. Through

limited education, symbolic international activity, and carefully negotiated autonomy, SADUM managed to preserve the spiritual and intellectual foundations of Islam in Central Asia and Kazakhstan until the dissolution of the USSR.

Discussion

The analysis of SADUM's history between the 1940s and 1980s demonstrates the institution's unique ability to function as both a religious and diplomatic entity under Soviet control. Although it was a product of political pragmatism, it became an essential guardian of Islamic learning and culture in Central Asia and Kazakhstan.

The reopening of the Mir-i Arab Madrasah and the establishment of the Tashkent Islamic Institute ensured the survival of a continuous Islamic scholarly tradition, connecting generations of ulama from the pre-Soviet to the post-Soviet eras. Furthermore, SADUM's participation in international conferences and exchanges challenged Western stereotypes of Soviet religious repression and provided the USSR with soft-power leverage in the Muslim world.

However, SADUM's religious autonomy remained limited. The organization was monitored by the state, its curriculum and sermons were censored, and its leadership was often required to align with the official ideology. Nevertheless, within these constraints, SADUM's scholars managed to preserve essential elements of Islamic knowledge, Arabic scholarship, and spiritual heritage.

Conclusion

The activities of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM) from the 1940s to the 1980s represent a remarkable chapter in the history of Islam under socialism. Despite severe ideological pressure and administrative control, the institution succeeded in maintaining a limited but continuous system of religious education and external communication.

By training qualified religious personnel through the Mir-i Arab Madrasah and Tashkent Islamic Institute, SADUM ensured the survival of Islamic intellectual traditions within a secular, atheist state. Its international relations with Muslim countries demonstrated how religion could serve as an instrument of cultural diplomacy in the Cold War context.

The legacy of SADUM extends beyond its Soviet past: it laid the groundwork for the revival of Islamic education and institutions in post-independence Central Asia. Its efforts to preserve Islamic identity under political constraint stand as a testament to the resilience of faith and scholarship in one of the most ideologically controlled environments of the 20th century.

References:

1. Bennigsen, A., & Wimbush, S. (1985). Muslim National Communism in the Soviet Union. University of Chicago Press.
2. Khalid, A. (2007). Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia. University of California Press.
3. Ro'i, Y. (2000). Islam in the Soviet Union: From the Second World War to Gorbachev. Columbia University Press.
4. Tasar, E. (2017). Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia. Oxford University Press.
5. "Muslims of the Soviet East" (archival issues, 1960–1980). SADUM Publications, Tashkent.