

## POLITICAL CONDITIONS OF THE EARLY ISLAMIC EXPANSION INTO TRANSOXIANA

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**Abstract.** *This article examines the political conditions of the early Islamic expansion into Transoxiana. The process is interpreted not merely as military conquest, but through political fragmentation, the agency of local rulers, the role of Khurasan as a military-administrative base, tribute and taxation, Arab administration, alliances, resistance, and the strategies of regional elites. The sources and scholarly literature indicate that Arab-Muslim expansion was not a linear or uniform conquest. It developed through negotiated submission, fiscal dependence, military pressure, shifting coalitions, local accommodation, and gradual incorporation into the Islamic political order. The article argues that the political structure of Transoxiana made conquest difficult, uneven, and historically distinctive.*

**Keywords:** *Transoxiana, early Islamic expansion, Arab conquest, local rulers, Khurasan, Sogdiana, Bukhara, Samarkand, political fragmentation, tribute*

**Annotatsiya.** *Maqolada Transoxiana (Movarounnahr) hududiga ilk islomiy ekspansiyaning siyosiy shart-sharoitlari tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqotda jarayon harbiy istilo doirasida emas, balki siyosiy parchalanganlik, mahalliy hukmdorlar pozitsiyasi, Xurosonning harbiy-*

*ma'muriy tayanch sifatidagi o'rne, soliq va o'lpon munosabatlari, arab ma'muriyati, ittifoqlar, qarshiliklar hamda mintaqaviy elitalar strategiyasi orqali izohlanadi. Manba va adabiyotlar tahlili shuni ko'rsatadiki, Arab-musulmon ekspansiyasi bir yo'nalishli va tezkor bosib olish emas, balki muzokarali bo'ysunish, fiskal qaramlik, harbiy bosim va bosqichma-bosqich siyosiy inkorporatsiya jarayoni bo'lgan.*

**Kalit so'zlar:** *Transoxiana, ilk islomiy ekspansiya, arab istilosi, mahalliy hukmdorlar, Xuroson, Sug'diyona, Buxoro, Samarqand, siyosiy parchalanganlik, o'lpon*

**Аннотация.** *В статье анализируются политические условия ранней исламской экспансии в Трансоксиану. Процесс рассматривается не только как военное завоевание, но и как результат политической раздробленности, позиции местных правителей, роли Хорасана как военно-административной базы, налогово-даннических отношений, арабской администрации, союзов, сопротивления и стратегии региональных элит. Анализ источников и научной литературы показывает, что арабо-мусульманская экспансия не была линейным и мгновенным завоеванием. Она развивалась через договорное подчинение, фискальную зависимость, военное давление и постепенное включение региона в исламский политический порядок.*

**Ключевые слова:** *Трансоксиана, ранняя исламская экспансия, арабское завоевание, местные правители, Хорасан, Согдиана, Бухара, Самарканд, политическая раздробленность, дань*

**INTRODUCTION.** The early Islamic expansion into Transoxiana (Movarounnahr) cannot be adequately explained as a sequence of Arab military victories beyond the Oxus. The region that Arab-Muslim forces encountered was not a centralized state whose fall could automatically

produce territorial control. It consisted of politically differentiated oases, city-principalities, local dynasties, commercial elites, frontier zones and competing spheres of Turkic, Iranian, Arab, Tang Chinese and Tibetan influence. The political difficulty of the expansion lay precisely in this fragmented landscape: each city, ruler and oasis could negotiate, resist, submit temporarily, appeal to outside allies, or preserve limited autonomy under tribute obligations.

The available evidence shows that the main political units of the region included Toharistan, Sogdiana and Khwarazm, while Bukhara, Samarkand, Fergana and Chach functioned within wider networks of regional rivalry and external diplomacy [Lila, Reda, Abdelah, 2023, p. 38–49]. Hoyland notes that before firm Arab rule, Bactria and Sogdiana were divided among local rulers who governed their own territories while often recognizing the superior authority of the Turkic khagan [Hoyland, 2015, p. 119]. This situation shaped the entire character of Islamic expansion. The Arabs did not simply destroy one imperial structure; they entered a political field in which local rulers were active participants.

The central problem of this article is therefore to explain how political fragmentation, Khurasanian frontier administration, fiscal interests, local elite strategies and external alliances made Islamic expansion simultaneously possible and unstable. The argument developed here is that Transoxiana was incorporated into the Islamic political order not through immediate uniform conquest, but through a long process of military pressure, negotiated submission, tribute, local collaboration, rebellion and gradual administrative transformation.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS.** The article is based on written historical evidence, modern scholarly interpretations, numismatic indications, administrative and fiscal references, and regional political

analysis. The materials used in this study include research on Khwarazmian writing and cultural transformation, studies of Umayyad–Türgesh relations, scholarship on Bactrian local rulers and Arab domination, broader studies of the Arab conquests, and research on Islamization and frontier society in Central Asia. Numismatic and linguistic evidence is especially important for Khwarazm, where coin changes, administrative language and the replacement of local writing help clarify the political consequences of conquest [Matniyazov, 2021, p. 39–40].

The methodological approach combines source criticism, historical-comparative analysis, contextual political history and frontier studies. Source criticism is necessary because Arabic, local and modern scholarly traditions often describe the same process from different viewpoints. Historical-comparative analysis makes it possible to distinguish between military occupation, tributary dependence, negotiated autonomy, administrative incorporation and religious Islamization. Frontier studies are useful because Khurasan and Transoxiana formed not a fixed border, but a zone of movement, settlement, military pressure and elite bargaining. Particular attention is given to the role of local rulers as intermediaries rather than passive objects of conquest.

**RESULTS.** The first major result is that the political fragmentation of Transoxiana made conquest uneven. The region between the Amu Darya and Syr Darya was divided into several independent or semi-independent areas, including Toharistan, Sogdiana and Khwarazm [Lila, Reda, Abdelah, 2023, p. 38–49]. In Bactria, Xuanzang’s testimony, as discussed by Hoyland, describes a landscape of multiple rulers who administered their own territories while acknowledging Turkic supremacy [Hoyland, 2015, p. 119]. Such a structure created both

opportunity and difficulty for Arab commanders. It allowed them to negotiate separately with individual rulers, but it also prevented a single decisive victory from producing stable regional control.

The second result concerns Khurasan as the operational base of expansion. The appointment of Qutayba ibn Muslim as governor of Khurasan marked a decisive shift in Umayyad policy on the eastern frontier. Scholarship on Bactrian rulers interprets his appointment as part of a broader administrative transformation in which the Umayyads relied less on older aristocratic arrangements and more on professional frontier administrators [Huseini, 2024, ch. 4.1]. The expansion therefore depended not only on battlefield success, but also on the capacity of Khurasan to mobilize troops, negotiate with local rulers, manage taxation and impose forms of political dependence.

The third result is the importance of local rulers in negotiated submission. The case of Chaghaniyan is especially revealing: its ruler became one of the most loyal Bactrian allies of the Umayyads while preserving his own autonomy under Arab patronage [Huseini, 2024, ch. 4.1.3]. This example shows that political incorporation often worked through alliance rather than direct replacement. Local rulers could retain power if they accepted the new frontier order and provided strategic cooperation.

The fourth result is that fiscal and social measures were central to political control. In Bukhara, Qutayba reportedly introduced a policy that forced local merchants to vacate houses and property for Arab Muslim soldiers, thereby changing the social balance of the city [Huseini, 2024, ch. 4.1.4]. Another study emphasizes that Qutayba used fiscal concessions after military victories to win support from local populations and weaken existing rulers [Lila, Reda, Abdelah, 2023, p. 38–49]. These

measures indicate that conquest was closely linked with taxation, settlement and the reorganization of urban authority.

The fifth result concerns resistance and shifting alliances. The Türgesh under Suluk became a major obstacle to Umayyad control in Transoxiana and eastern Khurasan, inflicting significant defeats on Muslim forces in the 720s–730s [Yuldashev, 2025, p. 215]. Samarkand's ruler is described as voluntarily allying with Suluk, which shows that local elites actively used Turkic power to resist Arab domination [Yuldashev, 2025, p. 216]. Fergana likewise became a zone of rivalry involving Arabs, Turks, Chinese and Tibetans [Yuldashev, 2025, p. 217]. Hoyland's account similarly emphasizes that Chinese, Tibetan, Turkic, Arab and local aristocratic alliances shifted rapidly in the early eighth century [Hoyland, 2015, p. 150].

The sixth result is that defeat and retreat were part of the process. The battle near the pass associated with Junayd al-Murri's campaign, described as a severe blow by Türgesh forces, demonstrates that Arab military control in the region was fragile [Hoyland, 2015, p. 185]. The collapse of the Türgesh khaganate in 737–740 then created a political vacuum, allowing Arabs and Chinese actors to strengthen their position in Central Asian commercial cities [Yuldashev, 2025, p. 217–218]. Thus, Arab success depended not only on internal strength, but also on the fragmentation of rival powers.

The seventh result is that political incorporation created conditions for later cultural and religious transformation, but did not immediately equal Islamization. In Khwarazm, sources report that Qutayba destroyed those who preserved Khwarazmian writing and local historical knowledge, while later official correspondence shifted from Persian to Arabic and local rulers remained in vassal status [Matniyazov, 2021, p.

38–39]. Numismatic changes, including the conversion of Asqadjuvar and his adoption of the name Abdullah, indicate elite adaptation to the new order [Matniyazov, 2021, p. 39–40]. Yet the persistence of local dynasties and languages shows that political subordination, administrative Arabization and religious Islamization developed at different speeds.

**DISCUSSION.** The evidence makes it necessary to reject a simplified model of sudden conquest. Transoxiana's political structure forced Arab commanders to combine violence with diplomacy. Fragmentation enabled the Arabs to exploit local rivalries, but it also gave local rulers room to maneuver. A ruler could submit to avoid destruction, pay tribute to preserve autonomy, ally with Türgesh forces against the Arabs, or change position according to regional circumstances. This explains why the expansion was not linear.

The role of Khurasan was decisive because it converted raiding into frontier governance. From Khurasan, Arab commanders could organize campaigns, receive reinforcements, administer tribute, and sustain military pressure. However, Khurasan was also a frontier society exposed to tribal divisions, logistical constraints and resistance from both settled and nomadic actors. Arab military power was therefore real but limited. Tor's observation that Arab forces did not deeply penetrate the steppe, preferring ribats, oasis cities and the wealthier environments of Khurasanian towns, supports the idea that ecological and logistical conditions shaped the limits of expansion [Tor, 2009, p. 279–280].

Local rulers were not merely defeated elites. They were brokers of political transition. The Chaghaniyan ruler's alliance with Qutayba, Nizak's rejection of both Turkic and Umayyad authority in Toharistan, and Samarkand's alignment with Suluk all show that regional elites possessed agency [Huseini, 2024, ch. 4.1.3; Huseini, 2024, ch. 4.2.1;

Yuldashev, 2025, p. 216]. Their decisions shaped the rhythm of expansion more than any abstract imperial strategy. Some rulers gained protection through submission; others used external alliances to resist; still others converted or adopted Arabic-Islamic symbols as instruments of survival.

The fiscal dimension also complicates the idea of purely religious conquest. Tribute, taxation, property redistribution and urban settlement were political technologies. Bukhara's transformation through settlement of Arab soldiers among the local population shows that control over space and households could be as important as formal victory [Huseini, 2024, ch. 4.1.4]. Fiscal concessions after victory, where attested, suggest that commanders could undermine local rulers by presenting Arab authority as a less burdensome alternative [Lila, Reda, Abdelah, 2023, p. 38–49]. Such policies did not simply impose Islam; they rearranged loyalty, property and urban hierarchy.

The difference between political submission and religious Islamization is especially visible in Khwarazm. The weakening of Zoroastrian institutions and the decline of local writing reflected ideological and cultural consequences of conquest [Matniyazov, 2021, p. 39–40]. Yet these changes occurred through stages: first military defeat and vassalage, then administrative language change, then elite conversion and symbolic Arabization, and only later broader cultural transformation. Hoyland's observation that Arabs far from their homeland intermarried, adopted Persian speech and participated in Persian festivals further shows that the conquerors themselves were transformed by the societies they entered [Hoyland, 2015, p. 205].

External geopolitics was another key condition. The Türgesh challenge shows that Transoxiana was not simply an Arab-local battlefield. The region lay within a competitive field involving the

Umayyads, Turkic powers, Tang China, Tibet and local aristocracies [Hoyland, 2015, p. 150; Yuldashev, 2025, p. 214–215]. Fergana's position in this multi-power environment demonstrates why control over Transoxiana remained unstable [Yuldashev, 2025, p. 217]. Arab expansion became more secure not merely when local cities were defeated, but when rival coalitions weakened.

Finally, the early Abbasid and later Samanid context suggests that Islamic political order matured only gradually. The integration of figures such as the Barmakids into caliphal administration indicates that local or regional elites could become agents of Islamic imperial expansion rather than only its subjects [Huseini, 2024, ch. 4.3.3]. Later Samanid Islamization of Central Asia reshaped not only the steppe frontier but also the internal political structure of the Muslim world [Tor, 2009, p. 279]. This later development rested on earlier patterns: negotiated incorporation, frontier settlement, elite conversion and fiscal-administrative integration.

**CONCLUSION.** The early Islamic expansion into Transoxiana was shaped, first of all, by the region's political fragmentation, for Arab forces entered a world of oases, principalities, and regional elites rather than a single centralized state – a circumstance that made the conquest slow, uneven, and dependent on separate arrangements with individual local rulers. Within this process Khurasan served as the principal military-administrative base, where governors and commanders turned sporadic raiding into sustained frontier pressure; yet their success rested on administrative capacity, fiscal management, and negotiation no less than on military campaigns. The local rulers, for their part, remained active political agents who might submit, resist, ally with the Türgesh or other powers, preserve their autonomy under tribute, or integrate into the new

order, and it is precisely their varying strategies that explain why the expansion unfolded so differently from one region to another. Tribute, taxation, settlement, and the redistribution of property thus became central mechanisms of control, though political dependence did not always entail direct rule, and direct rule did not automatically bring about immediate Islamization. External forces – above all the Türgesh, together with the Tang Chinese and Tibetan contexts – meanwhile rendered Transoxiana a multi-polar frontier, and Arab success grew more durable only as rival coalitions weakened and political vacuums opened. For this reason the distinction between conquest, submission, fiscal dependence, administrative incorporation, and Islamization is essential, since these processes overlapped without ever occurring simultaneously. The Islamic expansion into Transoxiana was therefore not a uniform conquest but a complex political process, one that – by combining military force with negotiation among local elites and gradual incorporation into the Islamic political order – created the conditions for the later social, fiscal, linguistic, and religious transformation of the region.

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