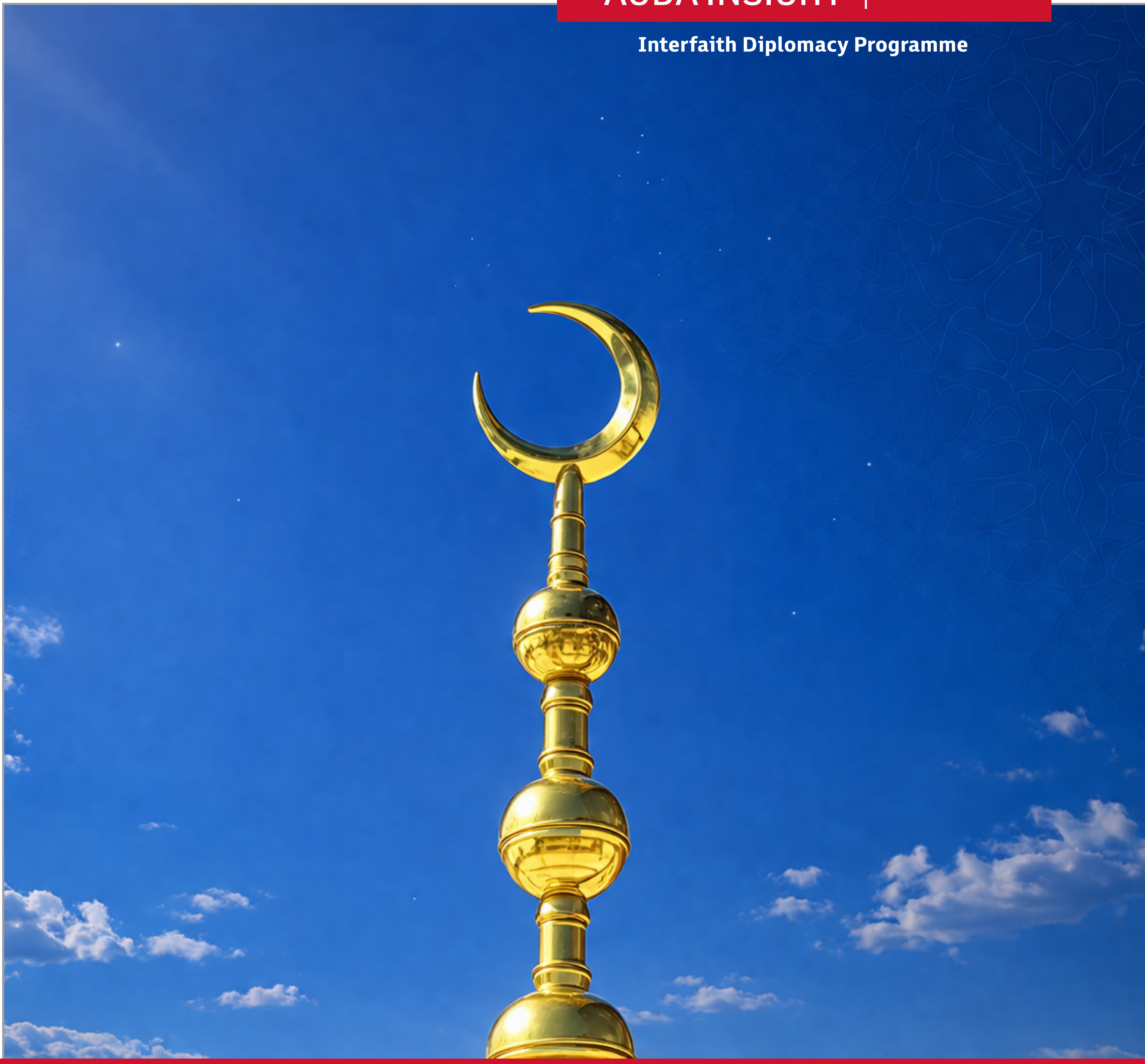
أكاديمية أنور قرقاش الدبلوماسية
ANWAR GARGASH DIPLOMATIC ACADEMY

بيت العائلة الإبراهيمية
ABRAHAMIC FAMILY HOUSE
בית המשפחה האברהמית

AGDA INSIGHT | MAY 2026

Interfaith Diplomacy Programme



The Islamic Tradition of Diplomacy

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Executive Summary

- The Islamic diplomatic tradition has developed over fourteen centuries through sustained engagement with the Qurʾān and the Sunnah, which have provided the core values shaping Muslim political and diplomatic conduct. Beginning with the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ, whose practices established the earliest precedents of coexistence, treaty-making and respect for emissaries, Islamic diplomacy emerged as a pragmatic, value-driven approach rather than a rigid ideological system.
- Foundational instruments such as the Medina Charter and the Treaty of al-Ḥudaybiyya demonstrated that peace, mutual security and intercommunal respect were central to the Prophet's ﷺ statecraft. Although later jurists attempted to formalise international relations through binary divisions such as dār al-Islām and dār al-ḥarb, these constructs proved insufficient for the complexities of a diverse and interconnected world, and Muslim rulers increasingly reverted to early Islamic principles emphasising justice, reciprocity, human dignity, and goodwill.
- Throughout the Golden Age, scholars such as al-Māwardī and al-Farrāʾ refined Islamic diplomatic theory by focusing on the ethics, skills and responsibilities of envoys, the sanctity of diplomatic immunity and the obligation to seek peace where possible. Islamic polities cultivated sophisticated diplomatic practices (including gift-giving, formalised treaties and, eventually, permanent embassies) that paralleled global norms while remaining rooted in Islamic ethical values.
- Today, Muslim-majority states operate within an international system defined by sovereign equality and global interdependence. Countries such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) exemplify how modern diplomacy can align with Islamic ethical tradition without adopting ideological or theologically prescriptive frameworks. By centring coexistence, mutual respect, non-interference, and adherence to international law, the UAE demonstrates how Islamic values can support stability, prosperity and constructive global engagement.
- This Insight offers four policy recommendations to develop these key themes even further:
  - » Diplomatic academies in Muslim-majority countries should teach the history of Islamic diplomacy.
  - » Muslim-majority countries should separate their foreign policies from any theological agendas.
  - » Muslim-majority countries should conduct their diplomacy in ways that reflect the respectful values and tolerant traditions of Islam.
  - » Muslim-majority countries should increase cultural and informational exchanges to enhance awareness and understanding between states and peoples.

The Issue

The central issue addressed in this Insight is how Islamic diplomacy, which is rooted in the Qurʾān, Sunnah and the Prophet Muḥammad's ﷺ foundational practices, should be understood and applied in the contemporary international system. Although early Islamic diplomacy championed coexistence, treaty-making and respect for other communities, later juristic interpretations introduced binary frameworks that framed the world as divided between Islamic and non-Islamic realms. These constructs, developed centuries after the Prophet ﷺ, were shaped by the geopolitical conditions of rapidly expanding empires rather than by the religion's original diplomatic ethos. As Muslim-majority states now function within a globalised order based on sovereign equality, the following question arises: how can Islamic values meaningfully inform diplomacy without reverting to outdated civilisational binaries or ideological agendas?

This issue is especially important for the UAE and the surrounding region. The UAE's diplomacy emphasises stability, interfaith respect and adherence to international law—principles that are consistent with the Prophet's ﷺ statecraft and the broader Islamic ethical tradition. In a region historically affected by ideological movements that politicise religion, the UAE's approach demonstrates that Islamic values of dignity, justice, tolerance, and goodwill can underpin modern foreign policy without imposing theological aims. By prioritising peaceful coexistence, mutual benefit and constructive global partnerships, the UAE advances a model of diplomacy that is both authentically grounded in its heritage and fully aligned with contemporary international norms. This model strengthens regional stability, counters extremism and offers a pragmatic framework for Muslim-majority states navigating an increasingly complex diplomatic environment.

Background

Throughout the last fourteen hundred years, Islamic nations, states and empires have based their understanding of international relations, war, peace, statecraft, and diplomacy to various degrees on the key sources of all Islamic authority: the Holy Qur'ān and the traditions (Sunan) relating to the Holy Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ. These traditions were recorded in two main bodies of early documents: the aḥādīth, or recorded sayings and actions of Muḥammad ﷺ, and the Sīrah, which are the early biographical studies of the Prophet's ﷺ life. The aḥādīth and the Sīrah are detailed and cover all aspects of his life, including his diplomacy.

The Islamic belief is that Muḥammad ﷺ is the exemplary human, whose decisions and actions were guided, shaped and supported by divine intervention and inspiration, and are thus considered to be qualitatively superior to those of other humans. In every sphere of private, public and political activity, therefore, scholars, jurists and leaders throughout the long haul of Islamic history have looked back to the life of the Prophet ﷺ to establish how things should be done.

With the Qur'ān and Sunnah providing the philosophical basis and values for diplomacy for fourteen hundred years, Islamic polities and statesmen have engaged in diplomatic relations with significant success, and created a framework for diplomatic activity that has moved considerably from its most common medieval form, yet routinely yielded positive results by staying true to the values embedded within it.

This Insight traces the evolution of ideas on how Muslim-majority countries should engage with other countries, including those with different religious traditions, and how they should view the role of religious values in their diplomatic practices. The Insight concludes by offering recommendations for modern Muslim-majority countries, based on what previously worked and did not work well, on how to best integrate the Islamic values of tolerance, mutual respect and harmonious coexistence into today's diplomatic world.

Early Diplomatic Activity

In 622 CE, Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ moved from Mecca to Medina and almost immediately began to create a single community from Medina's disunited Jewish, pagan and Muslim tribes and clans. Soon thereafter, he created an innovative legal diplomatic instrument to express the mutual defence responsibilities and the rights of all believers: the Medina Charter (sometimes also called the Constitution of Medina). It expressed inter-tribal and inter-religious tolerance and a desire for peaceful and mutually beneficial coexistence. Its introduction states that these different peoples would form "a single community [ummah wahida] to the exclusion of other [non-Medinan] people." The Charter did not include any syncretism, which is an attempt to create a hybridised religion with elements of everything. Rather, it states that the Jewish tribes within this community had their own religion and the Muslims had theirs, that no aid would be given to each other’s enemies and that no encroachment on their religious or civil rights would occur. The Charter appeared in the first major biography, the Sīrat Rasūl Allāh of Ibn Isḥāq, and in other early books of the Prophet’s biography. It has been at the heart of Islamic discussions on diplomatic practice and religious rights ever since.

Likewise, in 628 CE Muḥammad ﷺ negotiated the Treaty of Ḥudaybiyah, a pivotal armistice between his Medina-centred ummah and the non-Muslim Quraysh tribe of Mecca. It effectively ended the state of war between the two cities, affirmed a ten-year duration of peace and allowed Muḥammad’s ﷺ followers to enter Mecca the following year for a peaceful pilgrimage. Although we no longer have the exact wording of this treaty, aḥādīth and early biographies narrate the event and provide at least some of the text, which has also become a paradigm of Islamic diplomacy.

The ten-year duration of the treaty, the longest ever agreed between the Prophet ﷺ and another polity, was initially seen in Islamic jurisprudence as representing the maximum length that a treaty between a Muslim state and a non-Muslim state could be concluded. Yet, throughout the centuries various jurists loosened that restriction, first by creating ten-year treaties which were renewable in blocks of ten years, and then by adopting a pragmatic and flexible approach to the limit. For example, the treaty of 1535 between the Ottoman ruler Suleiman the Magnificent and Francis I of France — which scandalised some other Christian states which thought that a treaty with Muslims was unacceptable — championed the idea of peace and respectful coexistence between them for the entirety of their lives.[1] From that point forward, a flexible approach became far more common than the strictly legalistic viewpoint. Today, even states that claim to conduct statecraft based strictly on Islamic law, such as Iran and Pakistan, enter into treaty arrangements for longer or even unspecified durations.

The Prophet ﷺ made it clear that he could enjoy good relations and even sign formal treaties with non-Islamic tribes or polities[2], as he did in Medina and Ḥudaybiyya. This permissibility has consequently become the norm in Islamic statecraft. To give an example of its concrete diplomatic benefit, in August 623, when the Prophet ﷺ led a force to Al-Abwā, he encountered the Banū Mudlij and the Banū Ḍamra, local polytheistic clans of the Banū Bakr ibn ʿAbd-Manāt ibn Kināna[3,4] The two sides respected each other and forged formal written agreements establishing peace between them, specifically affirming that neither side would ever raid the other or ally themselves with the other’s foes. Although those clans did not convert to Islam (and were not required to), this mutually beneficial diplomacy bolstered Muḥammad’s ﷺ legitimacy, and the clans’ presence as allies and sources of intelligence on the caravan routes was strategically useful. The Banū Ḍamra later loyally fought on Muḥammad’s ﷺ side during the campaigns of Mecca, Ḥunayn and Tabūk. Likewise, shortly before the conquest of Mecca, when the Banū Khuzāʿa (Muḥammad’s ﷺ allies) suffered an attack by the Banū Bakr, the Banū Mudlij refused requests to take part in it, instead remaining faithful to their original treaty agreement with[5]Muḥammad ﷺ . Similarly, in Ibn Hishām’s famous book Al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah, there are numerous references to tribes with whom the Prophet ﷺ formally allied, such as the aforementioned Banū Khuzāʿa (“including both their Islamic and pagan clans”).[6]

What mattered most was the recognition that communities, even those with different confessional perspectives, could establish good relationships if they shared common goals on issues related to peace, security, stability, and prosperity. Peace between peoples must be pursued, as the Qur’ān makes clear in the verse: “if they [non-Muslim peoples, even enemies] incline towards peace, you too should incline towards peace and put your trust in God”.[7]

This, of course, flows out of the Qur’ānic reminder that God could have, “if He so willed, made [all people] a single community”[8], but instead He divided humankind into nations and tribes for a purpose, namely for them to “get to know each other”[9]. The plan of the Creator for communities to try to establish good relations so that they might be mutually enriching (in the widest sense of the word) remains the philosophical basis of the most ideal Islamic diplomacy.

The Expansion of Islam

After the Holy Prophet’s ﷺ death in 632 CE, the Islamic polity expanded quickly outside of Arabia and, within a century, had reached Spain in the West and the borders of India in the East. Explaining this expansion, scholars and jurists in the eighth and especially the ninth century CE — almost two hundred years after the time of the Prophet ﷺ — created an analytical framework to describe what we nowadays call statecraft and diplomacy. Two historical phenomena initially shaped that framework: first, the Islamic lands were then contiguous (that is, adjoining one another as a single political-religious region) and second, the stunning and seemingly unending successes of Muslim forces created in the minds of some scholars and jurists an expansionist and triumphalist spirit that had never been evident during the days of the Prophet ﷺ or his first four successors.

Essentially, the scholars of the ninth century divided the known world in a binary fashion into communities that were either Islamic or non-Islamic and created a set of political-military-diplomatic principles for how they should interact. Put simply, they said that the major divisions were the dār al-Islām (lit. abode of Islam), denoting regions where Islamic law prevailed and Muslims practiced their faith freely with protection from the state, and the dār al-ḥarb (abode of war), denoting adjoining non-Islamic lands whose rulers were seen as potentially threatening and were therefore called upon to either accept Islam or face war. Some scholars later asserted that a third community was the dār al-ṣulḥ or al-‘ahd (abode of treaty), denoting a non-Islamic land which had, through warfare or diplomacy, concluded a treaty with an Islamic government and thus ceased for the time being to be part of the dār al-ḥarb.

It is worth noting that neither these terms nor concepts were ever used in the Qur’ān or by the Holy Prophet ﷺ. Their first use was in Iraq by the influential scholar Abū Ḥanīfa (died 772 CE) and by his disciples Abū Yūsuf and especially Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Shaybānī (the latter being the father of Siyar, or Islamic international relations).[10,11] They were not bellicose or opposed to peace but simply wanted to regularise the ways in which empires and other polities engaged during the period of Islam’s great expansion and establish guidelines for how that diplomatic engagement — largely but not exclusively framed by war — might be improved. This bifurcated division of the world into two oppositional “abodes” also came to feature prominently in the teachings of Al-Shāfiʿī (died 820 CE).

In the minds of many Islamic scholars in the third and fourth centuries after the Prophet ﷺ, the Islamic empire (which had by then assumed the title of ‘Caliphate’) was homogeneous and included all the Muslims in the world. This, however, did not reflect the reality of the situation. Muslim communities were no longer contiguous and some existed beyond the boundaries of the Caliphate, often without any shared borders or direct engagement, much less Caliphal control. Moreover, from as early as a century after the birth of Islam, separate and non-partnering emirates or caliphates controlled different parts of the Islamic world, with a culturally rich Umayyad empire (descended from an earlier Umayyad empire with its capital in Damascus) controlling much of the Iberian Peninsula, as well as an equally civilisationally important Abbasid empire in the Near East with its capital in Baghdad. To complicate matters further, Islam’s geographical expansion had essentially ended by around 760 CE, although it would later begin again in South and Southeast Asia and parts of Africa through peaceful trade.

Around the borders of both Islamic empires (which also introduced a Golden Age) were many non-Islamic empires and countries. Some of them were so significant in terms of their power, influence and economic strength — notably the Carolingians who bordered the Umayyads and the (Eastern) Romans who bordered the Abbasids — that the two Islamic empires understood the need to accept their neighbours’ existence as centres of power and to engage with them diplomatically in order to establish security and maximise prosperity.

The aforementioned theoretical concepts of competition and rivalry religiously defined power blocs — as expressed in works of Siyar by al-Shaybānī and others — featured prominently in Islam jurisprudence and tended to relegate diplomacy mainly to the negotiation of treaties relating to war (rather than trade); non-aggression and border stability pacts (rather than alliances); and the legal and tax status of non-Muslims and short-term commercial visitors in Islamic territories.[12]

Many Islamic leaders and their administrations during the Golden Age saw this jurisprudential relegation as unhelpful and, supported by their own secretaries and administrators, reverted as fully as they could to the foundational principles of coexistence and diplomacy that they rightly understood as having existed at the birth of Islam, before the triumphalism of some of their predecessors complicated diplomacy. In short, they came to believe that the defining nature of Islamic diplomacy should be al-uswah al-ḥasanah, a Qur’ānic phrase that means “an excellent example” and “the best of human conduct”.

The principles fleshed out by secretaries and administrators (far more than by jurists) included ideas and principles that better reflected both the Islamic conception of humanity and specific key Qur’ānic precepts such as human dignity (karāmah), justice (‘adālah), goodwill (husn al-niyyah), fulfilment of oaths, basic fair play and an understanding of reciprocity (mu‘āmalah bi-l-mithl).

In fact, while reciprocity is important in diplomacy, Islam demands something even more elevated: “Good and evil can never be the same. Repel [evil] with that which is better, and thereupon the one whom between you and him is enmity [will become] like a devoted friend.”[13] Perceiving non-belligerent or non-threatening parts of the non-Islamic world as still being within the abode of war, as a competitive “other” to be fought via the jihād, thus fell short of this high religious standard. Even engaging with non-Islamic religious communities, especially those called the Peoples of the Book (Ahl al-Kitāb) should be done with the upmost respect, or as in the words of the Qur’ān, “with wisdom and good instruction”.[14] More explicitly, the Qur’ān also states: “do not dispute with them except in the most excellent manner”.[15] These verses refer mainly to religious tolerance, but their intention also clearly supports the type of conciliatory and coexistence-focused diplomacy that later Abbasid and other rulers believed best matched the ethical dictums of the religion.

No one captured the evolving understanding of Islamic diplomatic ideas and practices during the Golden Age as clearly and thoroughly as Al-Māwardī (died 1058 CE), author of the first work of Islamic governmental law – Al-Aḥkām al-Sulṭāniyyah (The Ordnances of Government).[16] Al-Māwardī did not place much focus on the binary division of the world into competing civilisational “abodes,” let alone view it as the most helpful way of framing statecraft and diplomacy. Two hundred and fifty years after Al-Shaybānī, Al-Māwardī wrote at a time when political fragmentation and challenges all around the borders had destroyed that earlier triumphalism. For him, the old prescriptive way of dividing the world and positioning Islamic polities against non-Islamic neighbours should only be seen as a descriptive way of understanding whom one might ideally make peace with. Although Al-Māwardī retained the binary terminology for the purposes of geographical and political categorisation, he did not see the jihād as the central feature of engagement between Muslims and non-Muslims, and there is no supremacism in his discussions on statecraft and diplomacy.

Similarly, in his important tenth-century treatise on the nature of Islamic diplomacy, Kitāb Rusul al-Mulūk, Abū ‘Alī al-Ḥusayn ibn Muḥammad ibn Al-Farrā draws heavily from the life of the Holy Prophet ﷺ and his successors to establish basic principles of diplomacy.[17] He entirely excludes the binary division and focuses instead on how diplomats (Rusul or messengers) should be selected for their well-developed communication skills, persuasive and conciliatory personal traits and unimpeachable morality, and discusses in depth how they might best succeed in advancing national interests when representing their leadership in negotiations with other polities.

Because the diplomats needed to understand their leaders’ clear intent, yet also be ready to take initiative and use their creativity to make decisions based on that intent if circumstances proved to be different when they arrived, Al-Farrāʾ’s and later Islamic diplomatic theory stressed that envoys had to be people of high intelligence and unwavering loyalty. Moreover, as they would sometimes need to travel far to foreign lands, many of which were hostile, they needed to be courageous, robust and able to handle stress. Additionally, the negotiation itself would require them to engage in sophisticated discourse, so diplomats needed to be well trained in rhetoric and logic.

The Prophet ﷺ saw the safety, immunity and hospitable treatment of diplomats as essential to effective diplomacy, and was deeply upset when any of his own emissaries were mistreated by the peoples to which he had sent them. Early books of Sīrah describe the ill-fated Battle of Muʿtah in 629 CE as the Prophet’s ﷺ firm response to the killing of one of his emissaries by a Ghassanid chief. This was a grave violation of his insistence that emissaries must be granted safe passage, immunity from detainment or imprisonment and a fair hearing, something that he demanded regarding the delegations that he received from other polities, even those with which he was at war. This concept of aman, or safety, even extended to emissaries of rulers whom he detested, such as the two envoys of the false prophet Musaylima who came to Medina with outrageous demands from their ruler. “Had you not been emissaries, I would have ordered you to be executed,” he told the envoys, who were instead well treated, housed, fed, and escorted back safely to the man that the Prophet ﷺ saw as an outrageous imposter.[18]

Indeed, the Prophet ﷺ welcomed envoys from cities and tribes throughout Arabia and beyond and granted them safe passage (from the moment they entered the Islamic territory to the moment they re-entered the lands beyond) and the best accommodation and hospitality (with generous feasts and entertainment). He also allowed non-Muslim envoys to freely practice their religions. For example, when a delegation of Christians arrived from Najran to engage in diplomatic discourse with the Prophet ﷺ , he let them pray in his mosque, which they did while facing east. Ibn Sa'd records in his Ṭabaqāt that the Prophet ﷺ was not only a very gracious host, but that he also provided financial support (including gifts of gold or silver) to delegations from particularly poor tribes that had sent envoys to liaise with him. He could not bear the idea that they would not be able to live comfortably while in the Islamic polity or struggle to meet the expense of returning home without hardship.[19]

Later jurists saw the Prophet's ﷺ example as the basis of their insistence that diplomatic protection, safety and immunity serve as foundational principles of Islamic diplomacy. Abū Yūsuf and Muḥammad al-Shaybānī, even despite their binary division of the world, held that diplomatic immunity started the moment an envoy entered the Islamic polity. If he was already in the territory of the polity, his aman started the moment he presented his credentials or the dispatching state communicated his appointment. This safety lasted until his departure, regardless of the outcome of the dialogue that took place during his visit They understood that the Prophet ﷺ himself had based this on the Qurʾānic injunction: "If any one of the Pagans seeks thy protection, then grant it to him, so that he may hear the word of God, and afterwards convey him to his place of safety."[20]

The Prophet ﷺ also established the Islamic norm of generous gift-giving to the envoys who visited him in Medina, and he sent beautiful and prestigious gifts to the heads of other polities with which he sought good relations. Ibn 'Abbās narrates a ḥadīth in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī (4431) in which the Prophet ﷺ stated in one of his final messages to his closest companions that they must "respect and give gifts to the foreign delegations as you have seen me dealing with them."[21] An example of how the Prophet ﷺ's gift-giving was a core aspect of diplomacy can be illustrated in a historical case from October or November 630 CE. When Yuḥanna ibn Ruʿba, the Christian ruler of Ayla (modern-day al-ʿAqaba at the head of the Red Sea) came to negotiate with Muḥammad ﷺ in Tabūk, the latter treated him with considerable respect and gifted him a luxurious cloak from Yemen.[22] They agreed that Ayla would pay a modest head tax, only a dinar per adult male per year (much less than what they were then paying to a local Bedouin tribe), and host Muslim travellers well, in return for which the Prophet ﷺ would offer friendship and protection and leave them to practice as Christians without interference. During the same period, he also wrapped a beautiful cloak around the shoulders of Ukaydir ibn ʿAbdul Malik al-Kindī, the Christian ruler of Dūmat al-Jandal, a large and fortified oasis town on the road from Tabūk to ʿIrāq[23,24] The Prophet ﷺ drew up a treaty with Ukaydir, which guaranteed him freedom and ongoing friendship and protection in return for a modest amount of annual jizya, the tax paid by Christians and Jews. In other diplomatic contexts, the Prophet ﷺ even gifted large herds of cattle and camels.

Although gift-giving was normal and expected in all ancient and medieval diplomacy, the Prophet's ﷺ example inspired within the Islamic diplomatic tradition a great emphasis on generous gift-giving, with the best-known example being the fabulous gifts sent in the first years of the ninth century CE by Hārūn al-Rāshīd, the fifth Abbasid caliph, to the famous Charlemagne, king of the Franks and the Carolingian Empire. The gifts — which were met with reciprocal generosity by Charlemagne — included a fabulous water clock, silks, expensive garments, hunting dogs, and even never-before-seen animals including an elephant.[25] In subsequent centuries, during the periods of the Mamelukes and the Ottomans, Islamic gift-giving at great expense was seen as a key method for establishing respect and goodwill in diplomacy. The Mamelukes spent a fortune on the gifts that they sent with their ambassadors — exotic animals, luxurious armour, porcelain and silk — to counties and empires as far afield as Italy, Russia and China. They even sent gifts to enemies as inducements towards peace.[26]

Islamic ambassadors were not sent to be long-serving, semi-permanent representatives in foreign courts until the Ottoman period, as was true of diplomatic practice everywhere. Permanent embassies only emerged as an ordinary diplomatic practice in the sixteenth century CE, and thereafter became a normal and expected feature of the Westphalian order that began a century later. Before that, Islamic leaders followed the Prophet's ﷺ practice of sending non-permanent missions; that is, of sending envoys to various places to deal with specific issues, after which they would immediately return home. This was especially the case during the centuries dominated by the Islamic binary division of the world into the abode of Islam and the abode of war.

Permanent Islamic embassies within non-Muslim polities and non-Muslim embassies within Islamic polities only fully emerged once this archaic binary position decreased in usage after the Mongols ostensibly brought the Islamic Golden Age to an end in 1258. Semi-permanent and then permanent trade stations and embassies began to appear during the rise of the Ottoman Empire, which controlled significant parts of Southeast Europe, West Asia, the Levant, and North Africa. Yet, after their initial expansion and successes faded, the Ottomans became far more focused on regularising relations with Christian tributary princes (who paid the famous kharāj or tribute), and trying to survive amidst constant internal challenges and threats at every border, than on asserting an Islamic expansionist agenda based on the jihād. In any event, it was hard for the Ottomans to see their empire as a homogenous Islamic polity in the way that the Umayyads or Abbasids, for example, had. Islam was not even the majority religion in many Ottoman territories throughout the empire's history. Rather, the empire was always religiously diverse and included significantly large populations of Christians (following Orthodox, Armenian and Catholic traditions), Jews and other religious groups which practiced under the Ottoman Millet system. Embassies became focal points for continuous communication and negotiations, while permanent trade missions became an integral part of international engagement.

Since the West's ascendancy from the sixteenth century onward, the binary divisions and the supposedly mandatory role of war have existed in our increasingly globalised world as a historical memory with very limited contemporary relevance or applicability. There have been no Islamic empires in the world for a century, and Muslim and Muslim-majority states exist alongside and between non-Muslim countries (in which large Muslim populations live and enjoy significant religious freedom). Muslim states have therefore steadily abandoned the use of classical Islamic jurisprudence and frameworks to underpin their foreign policies and diplomatic behaviour. With their economies interconnected as a facet of globalisation, and with membership in global bodies such as the United Nations requiring acceptance of the position that all states have a type of sovereign equality and a set of rights regardless of religious identity, Muslim and Muslim-majority states now consider it unthinkable to draw a distinction between themselves and the "non-Muslims" based on out-of-date ideas of civilisational separateness. Indeed, all Muslim states are members of the United Nations and are thus at peace with all other members by way of their signatures and ratifications of the UN Charter, a major instrument of international law. When any state enters the agreement to become a member of the UN, it legally binds itself as such. Islam requires Muslims to fulfil all agreed contracts, including treaties, even if they were signed with non-Muslims.[27]

The UAE as a Model

The quest for stability and prosperity has pushed almost all Muslim and Muslim-majority states to seek peaceful coexistence with neighbours and to form diplomatic relations based on the values of Islam, rather than from any theological imperative. The United Arab Emirates is a fine case in point. It is a Muslim state in which almost all citizens and many guests identify confidently as Muslims. Yet, steadfastly rejecting the notion of ideologised politics, the UAE has a foreign policy and supporting diplomatic strategies and practices that make little direct reference to Islamic theology, let alone contain any prescriptive subordination. Article 12 of the UAE Constitution states that while the UAE's foreign policy supports "Arab and Islamic causes and interests," the country is committed to "establishing closer friendship and co-operation with all the nations and peoples on the basis of the principles of the charter of the United Nations Organization and international ideals." Its diplomatic practices — like those of the Holy Prophet ﷺ himself — are fully consistent with Article 3 of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (1961), which outlines the functions and activities of diplomats and missions, with the difference being that permanent diplomatic missions and embassies now exist.

The UAE does not force Islam into a political mold, let alone advance an Islamic Daʿwah (evangelism) agenda when it diplomatically reaches out to the world. Indeed, it considers such efforts to be unhelpful and extreme distortions of Islam. Seeing the harm brought globally by Islamism, it rejects the notion that any politicised ideology should determine its diplomatic principles. Instead, by understanding that all states have rights, including the right to choose their own religions (or have no religion at all), the UAE seeks to build friendship with states that similarly pursue security, stability, prosperity and tolerance, and which share its national values. In its diplomacy, the UAE prioritises inter-religious tolerance, peaceful coexistence, mutual respect, non-interference, and a strong commitment to international law. It sees these as core Islamic values and ideal human values, and strongly ensures that its diplomacy emphasises the principles that the Holy Prophet ﷺ emphasised when he dealt with people regardless of their religion: human dignity (karāmah), justice ('adālah) and goodwill (husn al-niyyah). The UAE uses these, rather than a theological agenda, to provide the most effective way for its diplomats to enhance human fraternity, strengthen cooperation, create mutual benefit, and resolve disagreement through dialogue.

Conclusion

Overall, it is clear that Islamic diplomacy has changed considerably from its late Umayyad and early Abbasid form, although the normative nature of Islamic Fiqh meant that early ideas endured, at least in legal theory, well after more pragmatic practices emerged. The more flexible approach, unbound from early triumphalist ideas about a binary civilisational conflict, more closely reflects the way that Islamic diplomacy began fourteen hundred years ago. This earliest form, which is pragmatic and not theologically driven, stresses the importance of seeking security and prosperity through diplomatic engagement with states that advance similar values.

Recommendations

Muslim-majority countries should draw from their rich traditions the values and ideals that support their worldviews and practices, without their diplomacy advancing a theologically framed agenda involving either Daʿwah or an assertion of cultural or religious superiority. With this in mind, the following recommendations should be considered:

1. Diplomatic academies in Muslim-majority countries should teach the history of Islamic diplomacy to develop an effective set of ideas for how Islamic values can, in today's conflictual world, support Muslim diplomats in the quest for peace, stability, security, and prosperity.

2. Muslim-majority countries should separate their foreign policies from any theological agendas and seek relationships and partnerships based on shared values, along with respect for other countries' religions.

3. Muslim-majority countries should conduct their diplomacy in ways that reflect the respectful values and tolerant traditions of Islam, thus serving as portraits of their nations' civilisational identities without creating cultural barriers.

4. Muslim-majority countries should increase cultural and informational exchanges to enhance awareness and understanding between states and peoples, which would help to prevent misunderstandings and build mutually beneficial and supportive relationships.

Recommended Readings

- "Arab Media Forum: UAE's foreign policy rooted in stability for all, says Dr Anwar Gargash", Gulf News, 27 September 2023. https://gulfnews.com/uae/arab-media-forum-uaes-foreign-policy-rooted-in-stability-for-all-says-dr-anwar-gargash-1.98375426

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Endnotes

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