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Religious Diplomacy in Islamic Civilization, Scholar-Diplomats, and the Contemporary Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet)

Historical Continuity, Institutional Development, and Contemporary Practice

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BASED ON

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ABOUT THE SERIES

The DCA Academic Brief Series presents concise and accessible summaries of scholarly discussions hosted or supported by the Diyanet Center of America. The series seeks to make academic scholarship available to wider audiences engaged in religious education and community learning.

Executive Summary

Religion has re-emerged as an influential factor in international relations, expanding the scope of diplomacy beyond traditional state institutions to include religious organizations, scholars, humanitarian actors, and faith-based networks. As international engagement increasingly relies on dialogue, public diplomacy, and intercultural communication, religious diplomacy has become an important field of scholarly inquiry. While the concept itself has gained prominence in contemporary international relations literature, this study argues that its underlying principles have deep historical roots in Islamic civilization. Rather than representing a new diplomatic practice, religious diplomacy should be understood as the contemporary expression of a long-standing tradition that combines ethical leadership, religious scholarship, and international engagement.

The study begins by examining the diplomatic practices established during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad. Diplomatic correspondence, treaty-making, the reception of foreign delegations, and the appointment of qualified envoys established principles of representation, negotiation, and peaceful coexistence that later became integral components of Islamic diplomatic thought. Although these practices developed within a historical context distinct from the modern international system, they performed comparable diplomatic functions by facilitating communication across political, religious, and cultural boundaries. The study therefore demonstrates that the essential characteristics of religious diplomacy, dialogue, trust-building, mediation, and responsible representation, were embedded in the formative experience of the Muslim community.

Building upon these historical foundations, the study explores the emergence of scholar-diplomats as influential actors in Islamic civilization. Throughout different historical periods, Muslim scholars frequently assumed diplomatic responsibilities because of their religious authority, legal expertise, linguistic competence, and familiarity with diverse societies. Figures such as al-Bāqillānī and Ibn Faḍlān, together with numerous Ottoman scholar-officials, illustrate how scholarship and diplomacy developed as complementary rather than separate fields of activity. Their diplomatic missions extended beyond political negotiation to include cultural mediation, religious dialogue, and the transmission of knowledge between societies. By emphasizing this intellectual dimension of diplomacy, the study broadens conventional understandings that focus primarily on political institutions and state actors.

The final part of the study examines the international activities of Türkiye's Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) as a contemporary institutional manifestation of this historical tradition. Through overseas religious counselors, educational initiatives, publications, humanitarian activities, and cooperation with religious communities around the world, the Presidency contributes to intercultural dialogue and public diplomacy while providing religious services to Muslim communities abroad. The study argues that these activities illustrate the continuing relevance of religious diplomacy in an increasingly interconnected international environment, where soft power, social trust, and people-to-people engagement have become essential dimensions of global relations.

Ultimately, the study concludes that religious diplomacy represents far more than an auxiliary instrument of foreign policy. Instead, it constitutes a civilizational tradition that integrates religious knowledge, ethical responsibility, intercultural competence, and institutional engagement. By connecting the historical development of Islamic diplomacy with the contemporary role of the Presidency of Religious Affairs, the study offers an interdisciplinary framework that enriches debates in Islamic studies, diplomatic history, international relations, and public diplomacy. It further argues that the future effectiveness of religious diplomacy will depend upon cultivating a new generation of scholar-diplomats capable of combining theological expertise with diplomatic professionalism, cultural literacy, and global engagement.

KEY POINTS

- Religious diplomacy has deep historical roots in Islamic civilization.
- Early Islamic diplomacy established enduring principles of representation, negotiation, and peaceful coexistence.
- Muslim scholars historically served as important diplomatic actors alongside political authorities.
- The Presidency of Religious Affairs represents one of Türkiye's principal institutions of contemporary religious diplomacy.
- Future religious diplomacy requires globally competent scholar-diplomats equipped with theological expertise, intercultural competence, and international experience.

CENTRAL QUESTION

How has religious diplomacy evolved from early Islamic civilization into a contemporary instrument of international engagement?

CORE ARGUMENT

Religious diplomacy represents a continuous civilizational tradition that integrates religious scholarship, diplomacy, and public engagement across historical and contemporary contexts.

MAIN CONTRIBUTION

The study connects the historical evolution of Islamic diplomacy with the institutional development of Türkiye's contemporary religious diplomacy.

PRIMARY AUDIENCE

Scholars of Islamic studies, diplomacy, international relations, theology, public diplomacy, and policymakers.

1. Why This Study Matters

Religion continues to shape international affairs in ways that extend beyond theology and worship. Religious institutions increasingly participate in humanitarian assistance, intercultural dialogue, education, conflict prevention, and community engagement, making them influential actors within contemporary public diplomacy. As diplomacy evolves beyond traditional state-to-state relations, understanding the contribution of religious institutions has become increasingly important for both scholars and policymakers.

Against this backdrop, the study argues that religious diplomacy should not be viewed solely as a modern innovation. While the terminology belongs to contemporary international relations, many of its defining functions, including representation, negotiation, mediation, and trust-building, were already present in the diplomatic practices of early Islamic civilization. Examining these historical experiences provides a broader framework for understanding how religious values and diplomatic engagement have interacted across different historical periods.

The study also contributes to current debates by demonstrating that the relationship between religion and diplomacy is not limited to formal foreign policy. Rather, it encompasses educational initiatives, scholarly exchange, humanitarian cooperation, cultural representation, and engagement with Muslim communities worldwide. Within this framework, the institutional experience of Türkiye's Presidency of Religious Affairs illustrates how historical traditions of religious representation continue to influence contemporary international engagement.

KEY INSIGHT

Religious diplomacy is presented not simply as a diplomatic tool but as a long-standing civilizational tradition that connects religious scholarship, ethical leadership, and international engagement across different historical periods.

Historical Foundations of Religious Diplomacy

The study situates the origins of religious diplomacy within the formative period of Islamic civilization, arguing that the diplomatic practices established during the Prophet Muhammad's leadership in Medina laid the foundations for later traditions of international engagement. Although the institutional structures of the seventh century differed fundamentally from the modern state system, diplomatic correspondence, treaty-making, the reception of delegations, and the appointment of envoys fulfilled functions comparable to those associated with contemporary diplomacy. These practices facilitated communication between different political authorities while promoting coexistence, negotiation, and mutual recognition.

Rather than relying exclusively on political authority or military strength, early Islamic diplomacy drew legitimacy from ethical conduct, credibility, and the ability to establish trust across cultural and religious boundaries. Diplomatic representatives were expected to demonstrate integrity, eloquence, sound judgment, and familiarity with the customs of the societies they encountered. Their effectiveness depended not only on conveying official messages accurately but also on representing the moral and intellectual values of the emerging Muslim community. In this respect, diplomacy functioned simultaneously as political communication and ethical representation.

The study further argues that diplomacy in Islamic civilization cannot be reduced to interactions between rulers. Religious scholars gradually assumed important diplomatic responsibilities because their authority rested upon learning, jurisprudence, and public trust. Their educational background, linguistic competence, and familiarity with different legal and cultural traditions enabled them to communicate effectively with foreign rulers and religious communities. Consequently, diplomatic engagement became closely associated with scholarship, creating a tradition in which knowledge itself served as a diplomatic resource.

Historical figures discussed in the study, including al-Bāqillānī, Ibn Faḍlān, and numerous Ottoman scholar-officials, illustrate how scholarly authority strengthened diplomatic legitimacy. Their missions extended beyond political negotiation to include cultural interpretation, religious dialogue, and the transmission of knowledge between societies. This broader understanding of diplomacy challenges narrow state-centric perspectives by demonstrating that religious and intellectual actors frequently shaped international relations alongside political institutions.

The historical experience presented in the study also highlights the enduring relationship between diplomacy and communication. Successful representation required an appreciation of local customs, sensitivity to cultural differences, and the capacity to frame religious principles in ways that encouraged dialogue rather than confrontation. These qualities, according to the study, remain equally relevant for

contemporary religious diplomacy, where credibility and trust often determine the effectiveness of international engagement more than formal political authority alone.

KEY INSIGHT

The study demonstrates that early Islamic diplomacy established a model of international engagement in which ethical leadership, scholarly authority, and intercultural communication functioned as complementary sources of diplomatic legitimacy rather than separate domains.

Contemporary Religious Diplomacy and the Presidency of Religious Affairs

Having established the historical continuity of religious diplomacy, the study turns to its contemporary institutional expression through the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet). It argues that religious diplomacy today extends well beyond conventional religious services, encompassing educational cooperation, humanitarian engagement, intercultural dialogue, religious counseling, and institutional partnerships across national borders. In this sense, the Diyanet functions not only as a domestic religious authority but also as an increasingly visible actor in Türkiye's international public diplomacy.

The institutional expansion of the Presidency of Religious Affairs reflects broader transformations in global diplomacy. Contemporary international relations increasingly involve actors beyond foreign ministries, including universities, civil society organizations, humanitarian agencies, and faith-based institutions. The study positions the Diyanet within this changing diplomatic environment by arguing that religious institutions possess distinctive capacities for building long-term relationships with communities through shared beliefs, educational activities, and moral credibility. Unlike traditional diplomatic engagement, which often concentrates on governmental negotiations, religious diplomacy frequently operates through sustained societal interaction and people-to-people communication.

According to the study, one of the defining characteristics of the Diyanet's international activities is its emphasis on serving Muslim communities abroad while simultaneously contributing to intercultural dialogue. Religious counselors, attachés, educational centers, publications, and cooperation with religious institutions enable the Presidency to maintain continuous engagement with diverse societies. These activities seek not only to provide religious guidance but also to strengthen social cohesion, preserve cultural identity, and encourage constructive interaction between Muslim minorities and the societies in which they live. In doing so, the institution contributes to both community resilience and international understanding.

The study further argues that contemporary religious diplomacy should be understood within the broader framework of public diplomacy and soft power. Rather than relying on coercive instruments, religious diplomacy seeks to cultivate influence through credibility, dialogue, education, and ethical leadership. Religious institutions are therefore able to generate trust that cannot always be achieved through political or economic means alone. This capacity becomes particularly valuable in periods of social polarization,

cultural misunderstanding, or humanitarian crisis, where faith-based actors often retain access to local communities and enjoy a degree of public legitimacy unavailable to state institutions.

At the same time, the study cautions that institutional capacity alone is insufficient for effective religious diplomacy. Success ultimately depends on the qualifications of those who represent religious institutions internationally. Building upon the historical model of the scholar-diplomat, the author argues that contemporary representatives must combine advanced theological knowledge with foreign language proficiency, intercultural competence, communication skills, and an informed understanding of international affairs. They must be capable of engaging with diverse audiences, responding to contemporary social challenges, and presenting Islamic scholarship in ways that are both intellectually rigorous and culturally accessible.

This emphasis on human capital represents one of the study's most significant contributions. Rather than treating religious diplomacy primarily as an institutional function, the author places considerable importance on the formation of individuals who can successfully operate across religious, cultural, and political boundaries. The historical experience of Islamic civilization demonstrates that diplomacy has always depended upon knowledgeable and trusted representatives. In the contemporary context, this requires educational models that integrate Islamic sciences with international relations, comparative religion, communication, foreign languages, and area studies. Such an interdisciplinary approach would prepare future scholar-diplomats for increasingly complex global environments.

The study therefore presents the Presidency of Religious Affairs not simply as an administrative institution but as the contemporary continuation of a much older tradition in which religious scholarship, ethical responsibility, and international engagement reinforce one another. By institutionalizing these functions within a modern organizational framework, the Diyanet illustrates how historical diplomatic practices can be adapted to address the opportunities and challenges of twenty-first-century international relations.

KEY INSIGHT

As religious institutions assume more visible roles in international affairs, how can they preserve scholarly credibility and religious independence while simultaneously contributing to national public diplomacy objectives?

Concluding Reflections

This study demonstrates that religious diplomacy is neither a recent innovation nor merely an extension of state foreign policy. Rather, it represents a historically grounded tradition that has continuously evolved alongside the political, intellectual, and institutional development of Islamic civilization. By tracing this evolution from the diplomatic practices of the Prophet Muhammad to the activities of scholar-diplomats and, ultimately, to the contemporary Presidency of Religious Affairs, the study offers a comprehensive understanding of how religious authority has historically contributed to international engagement.

One of the study's principal contributions is its challenge to conventional understandings of diplomacy that privilege political institutions while overlooking religious actors. The historical evidence presented throughout the study suggests that diplomacy has frequently relied upon scholars, jurists, and religious authorities whose legitimacy derived not from political office but from knowledge, ethical credibility, and public trust. These qualities enabled them to communicate across cultural boundaries, mediate differences, and establish durable relationships among diverse communities. Religious diplomacy, therefore, should be understood as an integral component of broader diplomatic history rather than a peripheral or exceptional phenomenon.

The contemporary activities of the Presidency of Religious Affairs further illustrate that these historical traditions continue to inform present-day international engagement. Educational cooperation, religious guidance, humanitarian initiatives, and intercultural dialogue reflect an understanding of diplomacy that prioritizes long-term relationships and mutual understanding alongside formal interstate interaction. In this regard, the study presents religious diplomacy as an important complement to conventional public diplomacy, particularly in societies where religion continues to shape social trust, cultural identity, and public life.

Finally, the study emphasizes that the future of religious diplomacy will depend on investing in individuals as much as institutions. Global religious engagement increasingly requires representatives who are capable of combining theological expertise with intercultural competence, foreign language skills, historical awareness, and diplomatic professionalism. Preparing such scholar-diplomats represents both an educational challenge and a strategic opportunity for institutions seeking to contribute constructively to international peace, dialogue, and cooperation.

Academic Contributions

This Academic Brief makes four principal contributions to the literature on religion and international relations.

First, it reconceptualizes religious diplomacy as a historically continuous tradition rather than a contemporary policy innovation. By tracing diplomatic practices from the formative period of Islam to modern institutions, the study demonstrates the enduring relevance of Islamic diplomatic thought.

Second, it highlights the often-overlooked role of scholar-diplomats in Islamic civilization. Rather than treating diplomacy solely as a political function, the study shows how religious scholars historically contributed to negotiation, mediation, cultural exchange, and international representation.

Third, it provides an institutional analysis of the Presidency of Religious Affairs as a contemporary actor in religious diplomacy. Through its international educational, humanitarian, and religious activities, the Diyanet illustrates how historical diplomatic traditions have been adapted to contemporary global conditions.

Finally, the study offers an interdisciplinary framework that brings together Islamic studies, diplomatic history, international relations, and public diplomacy. In doing so, it broadens existing discussions on soft power by demonstrating how religious knowledge and institutional credibility can contribute to international cooperation and intercultural understanding.

Selected References

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Source Study

	Primary Source Religious Diplomacy in Islamic Civilization, Scholar-Diplomats, and the Contemporary Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) Historical Continuity, Institutional Development, and Contemporary Practice
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This academic brief is an accessible presentation of the principal themes and arguments developed in the source study. It does not replace the full scholarly text or its detailed references.

Editorial Note

This brief is intended for educational use. It summarizes a scholarly discussion without presenting the Diyanet Center of America as a policy institute, think tank, or body issuing binding academic judgments.

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