

ANUSHTEGINID FOREIGN POLICY AND THE IDEOLOGICAL WAR WITH THE ABBASID CALIPHATE (A CASE STUDY OF THE ERA OF KHWARAZMSHAH ALAUDDIN MUHAMMAD)

Aziz A. Tolibjonov,

*Researcher, Department of the History of Uzbekistan,
National University of Uzbekistan.*

Abstract

This article examines a critical juncture in the foreign policy of the Anushteginid (Khwarazmian) dynasty: the escalating conflict between Sultan Ala al-Din Muhammad (r. 1200–1220) and the Abbasid Caliph al-Nasir li-Din Allah (r. 1180–1225). Employing a qualitative, historical-critical methodology, this study investigates how a geopolitical rivalry for regional hegemony transformed into an unprecedented ideological war. The Results section delineates the key stages of this policy, including the discovery of the Caliph's anti-Khwarazmian intrigues, the Sultan's subsequent use of "fatwa diplomacy" to delegitimize the Abbasid caliphate, and the ambitious but failed project to install a rival "anti-caliph." The Discussion analyzes the strategic implications of this radical foreign policy, arguing that while it represented the apex of Anushteginid imperial ambition, it ultimately proved catastrophic. By instigating a schism within the leadership of the *Dar al-Islam*, Sultan Muhammad undermined his own spiritual legitimacy and precipitated the profound diplomatic isolation of his empire. The article concludes that this internal fracture was a decisive factor that crippled the potential for a united Islamic response, thereby creating a vacuum of authority that facilitated the devastating success of the subsequent Mongol invasions.

Keywords

Anushteginid Dynasty, Khwarazmian Empire, Abbasid Caliphate, Ala al-Din Muhammad, Foreign Policy, Fatwa Diplomacy, Schism, Islamic Political Thought, Thirteenth Century, Mongol Invasion.

1. Introduction

The foreign policy of the Anushteginid state in the early thirteenth century represents a compelling case study in the perils of imperial overreach and ideological confrontation. At its zenith under Sultan Ala al-Din Muhammad, the Khwarazmian Empire had become the preeminent military power in the eastern Islamic world (Ziyo, 2001, p. 136). This rapid expansion inevitably brought him into conflict with the resurgent Abbasid Caliphate under the astute Caliph al-Nasir li-Din Allah, who was actively working to restore the direct political authority of his office. The clash between a Sultan seeking universal dominion and a Caliph reclaiming political prerogative set the stage for a conflict that would irrevocably alter the geopolitical landscape (Khayrullaev, 2003, p. 55).

The rivalry, initially centered on control over territories in western Iran (Iraq al-Ajam), quickly transcended conventional geopolitics (Timokhin, 2020, p. 130). It evolved into a profound ideological confrontation that struck at the core of the traditional Sunni political order. This study addresses the central research question: How and why did the foreign policy of Sultan Ala al-Din Muhammad towards the Abbasid Caliphate evolve from strategic rivalry into an open ideological schism, and

what were the consequences of this policy for the Anushteginid state on the eve of the Mongol invasion?

This paper argues that the Sultan, spurred by the Caliph's covert hostility, adopted a revolutionary and ultimately self-defeating foreign policy of "fatwa diplomacy." Instead of seeking accommodation, he launched an ideological assault aimed at the complete delegitimization and overthrow of the Abbasid Caliphate. This policy culminated in the audacious project to install a rival "anti-caliph," a move that fractured the unity of the *Dar al-Islam* and left the empire isolated (Davlatov, 2010, p. 24).

2. Methods

This study employs a qualitative, historical-critical methodology to analyze the evolution and consequences of Anushteginid foreign policy. The approach is based on the systematic analysis and synthesis of primary chronicles (as cited in modern scholarship) and secondary academic literature. Each factual claim in the Results section is meticulously cross-referenced with the specific page number from the original source list provided for this research, ensuring a direct and verifiable link between evidence and assertion. The citation format adheres to the Author-Date-Page system, common in leading humanities and social science journals.

3. Results

The historical analysis reveals a clear, escalating trajectory in Anushteginid foreign policy towards the Abbasid Caliphate, moving from strategic rivalry to a systematic campaign of ideological delegitimization.

3.1. The Catalyst for Conflict: Intrigue and Humiliation

The relationship between Sultan Muhammad and Caliph al-Nasir was never amicable, with the Caliph inciting the Ghurids against the Khwarazmshah from his early, weaker years. The tipping point occurred in 1215 when the Sultan conquered Ghazna. Among the state documents of Sultan Shihabuddin, he discovered a letter from Caliph al-Nasir, which proposed that the Ghurids should unite with the Qara Khitai to attack the Khwarazmshah (Juvaynī, 1999, p. 304). The insulting language in these letters further enraged the Sultan. This discovery confirmed his belief that the Caliph was the instigator of all wars against him.

The Caliph's provocations extended to public diplomatic insults. A particularly inflammatory incident was the Caliph's preferential treatment of the envoys of the Isma'ili leader Jalaluddin Hasan over the Sultan's own envoys, which further strained relations (Juvaynī, 1999, p. 311). Another major insult occurred during the Hajj pilgrimage of 1212-1213, when the Caliph ordered that the caravan of the Isma'ili leader's mother be given official precedence over the Khwarazmshah's own pilgrims' caravan (Erdogan, 2020, pp. 110–111). For the Sultan, this public subordination to a group long considered heretical was an intolerable political and personal affront (Erdogan, 2020, pp. 110–111). Further fueling the conflict was the Caliph's alleged use of Isma'ili assassins to eliminate Khwarazmian officials, such as the governor of Iraq, Oghulmish al-Otabekiy (Timokhin, 2020, p. 130).

3.2. The Ideological Counter-Offensive: 'Fatwa Diplomacy'

In response, Sultan Muhammad pivoted his foreign policy to an ideological offensive. After his demands to have the *khutba* read in his name in Baghdad were refused (Avazova, 2014, p. 19; Grousset, 1970, p. 167), he sought a religious-legal justification for war. He convened a council of his empire's leading religious scholars (*ulama*) and compelled them to issue a *fatwa* against the Caliph (Avazova, 2014, p. 24; Buniyodov, 1998, p. 115). This edict declared that the Abbasids had no right to the Caliphate, that true leadership belonged to the descendants of Husayn, and that the Abbasids

were negligent in their religious duties (Juvaynī, 1999, p. 311; Vurgun, 2021, p. 208). The Caliph was declared a "tyrant" and an enemy of the faith (Hodgson, 1974, p. 285; Rahimov, 2015, p. 113).

Armed with this religious charter, the Sultan enacted his policy throughout the empire. In March 1218, he ordered that the Caliph's name be removed from the Friday sermon (*khutba*) across all mosques in his domain (Vurgun, 2021, p. 208). Later, after arriving in his new capital of Samarkand, he extended this decree to the coinage (*sikka*), completely severing the formal symbols of loyalty to the Abbasid Caliphate (Masharipov, 2019, p. 124). This was an open declaration of schism, symbolically repositioning the center of Islamic authority from Baghdad to Mawarannahr (Kamoliddin, 2014, p. 126).

3.3. The 'Anti-Caliph' Project and the Failed March on Baghdad

The final and most radical phase of this policy was the attempt to create a new caliphate under Anushteginid patronage. To replace the "deposed" Caliph, the Sultan summoned Sayyid Ala al-Mulk al-Tirmidhi from Tirmidh, a respected descendant of Ali, with the intent of making him the new, legitimate Caliph (Juvaynī, 1999, p. 311; Buniyodov, 1998, p. 115; Timokhin, 2020, p. 130). This project was a direct attempt to seize control of the highest religious office in Islam (Davlatov, 2010, p. 24).

To realize this plan, the Sultan assembled a massive army (with sources citing figures of 50,000 to 100,000 troops) and began a direct march on Baghdad in 1217 (Ali-zade, 2004, p. 217; Abdrimov, 2021, p. 179; Hodgson, 1974, p. 285). The Sultan's refusal to negotiate was demonstrated by his humiliating reception of the Caliph's envoy, the famed Shaykh Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi (Doygun, 2023, p. 87). However, this grand military expedition ended in disaster. The army was caught in a severe, early blizzard in the Zagros Mountains, suffering catastrophic losses that forced the Sultan to abandon the campaign (Grousset, 1970, p. 167). To suppress potential dissent against this radical policy, the Sultan had already taken the pre-emptive step of exiling the influential Burhanuddin clerical family of Bukhara (Nizami-i-'Arudi, 1921, p. 111). The campaign's failure left the Sultan in a precarious position: he had declared war on the spiritual head of Islam but had failed to replace him, leaving his empire ideologically isolated.

4. Discussion

The results demonstrate that Sultan Ala al-Din Muhammad's foreign policy, while a bold assertion of imperial power, was a strategic and ideological miscalculation. The "fatwa diplomacy" and the "anti-caliph" project, rather than cementing his authority, led directly to the weakening and isolation of the Anushteginid state. The Sultan's use of Shi'a-oriented ideas to attack the Sunni Caliph was a pragmatic, yet deeply divisive, tactic (Timokhin, 2020, p. 130). His goal was not merely political but aimed at establishing a new world order where the Khwarazmshah held both supreme temporal and spiritual authority (Kafesoğlu, 2016, p. 230).

The most significant consequence of this policy was the profound diplomatic isolation of the Khwarazmian Empire (Davlatov, 2010, p. 24). In attacking the institution of the Caliphate, the Sultan had transgressed a foundational principle of the Sunni political order. He forfeited the moral authority required to build a broad-based coalition. This isolation meant that when the Mongol threat materialized, no other major Muslim power felt a political or religious obligation to come to his aid.

The internal schism between the Anushteginid Sultan and the Abbasid Caliph created the ideal conditions for the success of the Mongol invasion. While the claim that Caliph al-Nasir actively incited the Mongols against Khwarazm persists in some sources, most notably in accusations later made by the Sultan's son (Bartol'd, 1993, p. 121), direct proof is lacking. However, active collusion was not necessary for the outcome to be disastrous. The state of declared ideological war between the two most powerful Muslim leaders ensured that no unified strategy or joint military command could

be formed. The Sultan, having alienated the spiritual head of Islam, lacked the supreme legitimacy needed to rally the entirety of the faithful to a holy war. This internal weakness, a direct result of the Sultan's own radical foreign policy, was a critical vulnerability that the Mongols expertly exploited.

5. Conclusion

This study of Anushteginid foreign policy has shown that the conflict between Sultan Ala al-Din Muhammad and Caliph al-Nasir li-Din Allah was not a mere contest for territory but an ideological war that ruptured the political fabric of the eastern Islamic world. The Sultan's response to the Caliph's enmity—a policy of "fatwa diplomacy" and the attempt to establish an "anti-caliph"—was a revolutionary act that sought to fundamentally re-center Islamic authority. This analysis concludes that this radical policy was ultimately a catastrophic failure. Instead of achieving absolute hegemony, the Sultan's actions led to his own delegitimization and the complete diplomatic isolation of his empire. The schism with Baghdad deprived the Sultan of the spiritual and political capital necessary to mount a unified and effective defense against the Mongol invasions. In the end, the Anushteginid Empire, the most powerful Muslim state of its time, did not fall simply because of an external foe, but because its own leader had shattered the internal unity and legitimacy of the world he sought to rule.

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