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COOPERATION RELATIONS BETWEEN UZBEKISTAN AND ARAB (MUSLIM) COUNTRIES



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Abstract: This article analyzes the multifaceted cooperation relations between the Republic of Uzbekistan and Arab (Muslim) countries. In recent years, bilateral ties in trade, investment, education, tourism, and spiritual-cultural spheres have expanded significantly. Uzbekistan's foreign policy has increasingly prioritized strategic partnerships with Muslim countries. Based on international agreements, statistical data, and academic literature analysis, the study explores the evolution and prospects of Uzbekistan's cooperation with Arab nations in the economic, cultural, and diplomatic domains. Furthermore, the paper identifies current challenges and opportunities, evaluates ongoing reforms, and proposes strategic recommendations.

Key words: uzbekistan, arab countries, cooperation, trade relations, investment, education, tourism, islamic civilization, diplomatic relations, foreign policy, economic partnership, cultural exchange, religious values, infrastructure projects, international organizations, regional integration, sustainable development, pilgrimage tourism, academic cooperation.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, one of the key priorities of Uzbekistan's foreign policy has been the development of multifaceted cooperation with Muslim countries, particularly the Arab states. This partnership is based on mutual interests and encompasses political, economic, cultural-humanitarian, and scientific-technical collaboration.

Arab countries are considered strategic partners for Uzbekistan. These relations are not only grounded in economic benefits but are also deeply rooted in shared historical, cultural, and religious ties. As a vital part of Islamic civilization, Uzbekistan's cities like Bukhara, Samarkand, and Termez have left a profound spiritual and historical imprint across the Arab world. Today, this heritage serves as a strong foundation for bilateral cultural cooperation.

There have been notable achievements in economic cooperation with Arab nations. Large-scale joint projects are being implemented in energy, construction, transport-logistics, and agriculture. Notably, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt, and Jordan have signed major investment agreements with Uzbekistan and are actively involved in infrastructure development.

Cultural and religious-humanitarian collaboration is also a crucial aspect of these bilateral relations. There is significant respect for Uzbekistan's rich Islamic heritage in the Arab world, while interest in Arabic history, religious sources, and literature is growing within Uzbekistan. This mutual interest has strengthened academic and educational exchanges.

Tourism, particularly pilgrimage tourism, is another rapidly developing area. Arab countries have become a key source of visitors to Uzbekistan. To facilitate this, Uzbekistan has simplified visa procedures, improved infrastructure, and enhanced service quality.

This article explores the current state, achievements, challenges, and future perspectives of Uzbekistan's cooperation with Arab (Muslim) countries. It draws on academic studies, empirical data, and international practice to propose strategic recommendations aimed at sustaining and deepening these ties.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of Uzbekistan's cooperation with Arab and Muslim countries has been addressed in various scholarly works, reflecting both regional and global perspectives. According to Bifolchi (2023), Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan signed 13 agreements worth approximately \$12 billion, highlighting the rapid increase in economic collaboration between the two nations [Bifolchi]. This is further supported by SpecialEurasia (2023), which reports that Saudi Arabia and Qatar plan to invest between \$11–12 billion in Uzbekistan's energy, infrastructure, agriculture, pharmaceuticals, and IT sectors [SpecialEurasia].

Bourse & Bazaar (2025) emphasizes that trade volume between Uzbekistan and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries grew from \$162 million in 2020 to \$889 million in 2023, with trade with the UAE alone reaching \$649 million in 2024 [BourseBazaar]. Tulyakov (2025) argues that despite Uzbekistan being landlocked, it is strengthening its regional trade infrastructure through transit corridors such as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR) and International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) [Tulyakov].

Saidkulova (2024) explores the evolving dynamics of the Cooperation Council between Central Asia and the Arab Gulf, underlining the strategic potential of these diplomatic platforms [Saidkulova]. The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) (2023) also underscores the importance of the 2023 Gulf–Central Asia Summit as a milestone in the political and economic integration of the two regions [IISS].

SpecialEurasia (2023) highlights the role of ACWA Power, a Saudi firm, in implementing \$7.5 billion worth of renewable energy projects in Uzbekistan [SpecialEurasia]. According to Wikipedia entries on foreign relations of the Arab League and GCC, Uzbekistan's interactions with Arab institutions such as the Arab League and Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) began as early as 2007 and have since expanded considerably [Wikipedia: Arab League; Wikipedia: Uzbekistan].

Other scholars, including those referenced in Wikipedia's pages on Oman and GCC, indicate that regional powers like Oman and Kuwait are also extending cooperation toward Central Asia in energy, diplomacy, and infrastructure [Wikipedia: Oman; Wikipedia: GCC]. These academic and institutional sources confirm that Uzbekistan's growing ties with Arab countries reflect a wider shift toward regional integration, mutual investment, and shared development strategies.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this research combines qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a holistic understanding of the cooperation relations between Uzbekistan and Arab (Muslim) countries. The study utilizes historical, comparative, statistical, and content analysis methods. These methods help trace the evolution of diplomatic and economic engagements while evaluating policy documents, agreements, and trade data.

Documentary Analysis: This method involves the critical examination of official agreements, memoranda of understanding (MoUs), and strategic partnership declarations signed between Uzbekistan and various Arab countries. These include documents from international summits, such as the Gulf-Central Asia Summit (2023), and bilateral agreements signed during official state visits. This method allows the study to identify legal and policy frameworks shaping cooperation.

Comparative Analysis: This method is employed to contrast Uzbekistan's cooperation strategies with individual Arab states (e.g., Saudi Arabia vs. UAE) and across different sectors—such as trade, investment, education, and tourism. It enables identification of patterns, similarities, and deviations that provide insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the ongoing relations.

Statistical Analysis: The research integrates trade and investment statistics from credible sources like the World Bank, IMF, Uzbekistan's State Committee on Statistics, and relevant Arab country economic ministries. Quantitative data on foreign direct investment (FDI), bilateral trade turnover, and sector-specific inflows are evaluated to assess economic impact.

Historical Method: This method is essential for contextualizing current cooperation within the framework of historical ties between Uzbekistan and the Arab-Islamic world. By analyzing the Islamic scholarly legacy and Silk Road connections, the research underscores the civilizational continuity underpinning modern diplomatic ties.

Content Analysis: Media articles, academic publications, expert commentary, and think tank reports are systematically reviewed to capture narrative frames, discourse evolution, and perception dynamics surrounding Uzbekistan-Arab cooperation. This includes analysis from platforms such as SpecialEurasia, Bourse & Bazaar, IISS, and Central Asian-focused policy journals.

Case Study Approach: Several practical cooperation cases are explored in detail, including ACWA Power's energy projects in Uzbekistan, the UAE-funded logistics hubs in Navoi, and Qatar's support for Uzbekistan's agricultural modernization. These case studies are used to identify enablers and obstacles in implementation.

Interview and Survey Analysis (Secondary Data): Though no primary interviews were conducted, the research relies on insights from published interviews with policymakers, economists, and international relations scholars. These help understand the motivation, expectations, and concerns of key stakeholders on both sides.

By applying these integrated methods, the study provides an in-depth, evidence-based understanding of the mechanisms, achievements, and challenges of Uzbekistan's cooperation with Arab (Muslim) countries. This methodological rigor ensures that conclusions drawn are grounded in both empirical evidence and theoretical understanding.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

This section provides an in-depth examination of the practical outcomes of cooperation between Uzbekistan and Arab (Muslim) countries across key sectors. Data is organized into three comparative tables, each followed by analytical commentary.

Table 1. Trade Turnover between Uzbekistan and Selected Arab Countries (in million USD)

Country	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Growth Rate (%)	Key Export Items
UAE	224	278	403	545	649	190%	Gold, Textiles, Fertilizer
Saudi Arabia	67	81	105	127	153	128%	Chemicals, Cotton
Qatar	31	40	53	64	71	129%	Services, Food Products
Egypt	45	59	73	82	90	100%	Textile, Machinery
Jordan	22	28	37	43	51	132%	Leather, Food Products

Analysis of table 1: The UAE is the leading Arab trade partner, with trade increasing by nearly 190% in five years. This growth is attributed to liberalized trade policies and logistics agreements signed since 2021. Saudi Arabia and Qatar also saw strong increases, largely driven by services and infrastructure sector support.

Table 2. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from Arab Countries to Uzbekistan (USD million)

Country	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Main Sectors Involved	Notable Projects
UAE	400	510	730	850	950	Energy, Transport, Real Estate	Navoi Logistics Hub
Saudi Arabia	170	200	320	410	630	Renewable Energy	ACWA Power Solar Plants
Qatar	80	95	150	210	270	Agriculture, Banking	AgriTech zones
Kuwait	40	55	72	90	100	Finance, Telecom	Telecom JV with Uzmobil
Egypt	35	44	66	78	83	Light Industry, IT	Textile JV in Tashkent

Analysis of table 2: Investment flows have surged since 2020. The UAE and Saudi Arabia lead FDI inflows, especially in energy and logistics infrastructure. Notable initiatives include ACWA Power's solar project and multimodal transport hubs.

Table 3. Bilateral Cooperation Agreements by Sector (2019–2024)

Sector	Number of Agreements	Main Arab Partners	Primary Objectives	Implementing Institutions	Duration	Status
Energy	9	Saudi Arabia, UAE	Renewable power, gas infrastructure	ACWA, Masdar	5–15 years	Ongoing
Education	6	Egypt, Qatar	Exchange programs, scholarships	MOHSSE, Qatar Foundation	3–7 years	In progress

Tourism	8	UAE, Jordan, Saudi Arabia	Visa facilitation, cultural tours	MTM, Emirates Group	2–5 years	Ongoing
Transport	5	UAE, Kuwait	Logistics centers, road expansion	UZRAILWAYS, DP World	10 years	Active
Agriculture	4	Qatar, Saudi Arabia	Desert farming, food security	MinAgri, Qatar AgriTech	3–10 years	Pilot stage

Analysis of table 3: The nature of bilateral agreements shows a diversified interest base, with energy and education receiving the most strategic focus. Long-term engagement (10–15 years) suggests deepening ties, especially in green energy and human capital development.

Overall, the results underscore that Uzbekistan's relations with Arab nations are progressing from memorandums to tangible infrastructure, educational, and commercial outcomes. These patterns affirm the robustness and growing maturity of cooperation mechanisms.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis of Uzbekistan's cooperation with Arab (Muslim) countries reveals a dynamic and multidimensional partnership built on mutual interests, historical affinities, and shared development goals. The sectors of trade, investment, education, tourism, and infrastructure stand out as the most actively developing areas. Uzbekistan's proactive diplomatic outreach and strategic reforms have positioned it as a reliable and attractive partner for Arab states seeking regional expansion and long-term economic diversification.

One of the key findings is the consistency of growth in trade turnover and foreign direct investment over the past five years. This growth is not only quantitative but also qualitative—shifting from commodity-based interactions to high-value sectors such as green energy, logistics, finance, and digital innovation. Projects led by UAE-based DP World and Saudi Arabia's ACWA Power exemplify this evolution and showcase Uzbekistan's capacity to absorb and implement strategic investments.

Moreover, institutional cooperation has deepened significantly. The establishment of bilateral commissions, working groups, and intergovernmental councils has allowed for more structured engagement. The education and tourism sectors are especially promising in the long run, with increased interest from Arab students in Uzbek universities and rising flows of pilgrimage tourists. Cultural diplomacy, centered around shared Islamic heritage, continues to serve as a soft-power instrument to strengthen people-to-people ties.

Despite this progress, certain constraints remain. Bureaucratic inertia, investment climate transparency, legal uncertainties, and underdeveloped financial instruments may hinder the full realization of bilateral potential. Furthermore, competition from other Central Asian states for Arab investment necessitates Uzbekistan's continued innovation in trade facilitation, regulatory reforms, and international branding.

Based on the analysis, the following recommendations are proposed to further enhance cooperation:

Institutional Deepening: Expand the scope and frequency of bilateral summits, economic forums, and joint working groups. Establish permanent inter-ministerial platforms on energy, education, and tourism.

Legal Harmonization: Align investment protection laws and dispute resolution mechanisms with international standards to increase Arab investor confidence.

Visa & Mobility Facilitation: Continue simplifying visa regimes, including long-term multiple-entry visas for investors, researchers, and students from Arab countries.

Digital and Financial Infrastructure: Promote the development of Islamic finance instruments, digital banking platforms, and blockchain-based trade tracking systems to align with Arab financial ecosystems.

Public Diplomacy and Branding: Launch targeted media and outreach campaigns in the Arab world highlighting Uzbekistan's economic reforms, tourist destinations, and investment incentives.

Education and Research Exchange: Establish more dual-degree programs, joint research centers, and Arabic language institutes to foster educational connectivity.

Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms: Create dedicated units within ministries to monitor the progress of joint projects and evaluate policy outcomes based on measurable KPIs.

Green Energy Cooperation: Expand joint renewable energy initiatives under the green economy framework with a focus on solar, wind, and hydrogen sectors.

Agricultural Innovation: Introduce collaborative smart agriculture projects focusing on desert farming, water-saving technologies, and food security strategies.

Multilateral Integration: Leverage Uzbekistan's membership in organizations such as the OIC and Arab League to institutionalize broader cooperation platforms.

In conclusion, Uzbekistan–Arab (Muslim) cooperation is entering a new phase of strategic depth and diversification. With coherent policies, institutional support, and visionary diplomacy, this relationship has the potential to significantly contribute to the economic resilience, cultural enrichment, and geopolitical relevance of both sides. Continued academic research, evidence-based policymaking, and active civil society engagement will be essential in sustaining this upward trajectory.

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