

Prospects for Developing Religious and Educational Relations Between Uzbekistan And Malaysia

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Abstract

This article analyzes the formation, development stages, and future priority areas of religious and educational relations between Uzbekistan and Malaysia. The study highlights the legal and institutional foundations created for bilateral cooperation by the religious and educational reforms implemented in Uzbekistan since 2017. It examines the development trends of cooperation in Islamic education, Hadith studies, Islamic civilization research, academic exchange, scientific conferences, joint research, pilgrimage tourism (Ziyarah tourism), and "Halal" standardization. The article reveals the significance of linkages between the Center of Islamic Civilization in Uzbekistan, the Imam Bukhari, Imam Termizi, and Imam Maturidi International Scientific Research Centers, and Malaysia's leading scientific and educational institutions. Based on visits, memorandums, and joint scientific and educational projects from 2024–2026, the study demonstrates that these relations are acquiring a strategic character.

Keywords: Uzbekistan, Malaysia, religious and educational cooperation, islamic civilization, hadith studies, academic exchange, pilgrimage tourism (ziyarah tourism), halal standards, scientific cooperation.

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1. Introduction

In today's context of globalization, the development of interstate relations is determined not only by political, economic, and diplomatic ties, but also by the deepening of religious, educational, scientific, and cultural cooperation. Religious and educational relations between Uzbekistan, which has made significant contributions to the historical and modern development of Islamic civilization, and Malaysia, which possesses advanced experience in modern Islamic education, religious governance, and the "halal" industry in the Muslim world, hold particular scientific and practical

significance. The relevance of this direction is explained by both countries' shared Islamic-scientific heritage and their approaches based on the principles of religious tolerance and enlightenment. As a result of the religious and educational reforms implemented in Uzbekistan in recent years, the activities of the Center of Islamic Civilization, the Imam Bukhari International Scientific Research Center, other international research institutions, and religious educational establishments have been significantly developed. This has created new opportunities for international scientific and academic collaboration. Utilizing Malaysia's experience is important for Uzbekistan in modernizing religious

education, advancing research on Hadith and Islamic civilization, expanding academic personnel exchange, and improving pilgrimage tourism (Ziyarah tourism) and the "halal" economy. The increase in high-level visits, new memorandums of understanding, and joint scientific projects during 2024–2026 transforms Uzbekistan–Malaysia religious and educational relations into one of the most promising areas of strategic partnership.

2. Methods

In the course of the research, the formation and evolution of bilateral cooperation were analyzed based on the principles of historical continuity and systematicity. Using the comparative analysis method, the similarities and differences in the religious and educational policies, education systems, and activities of scientific research institutions of Uzbekistan and Malaysia were studied. Through the method of documentary analysis, interstate agreements, memorandums of understanding, regulatory legal acts, and official statements were examined. Content analysis was employed to study the substance of diplomatic meetings, international conferences, and scientific-educational events.

3. Analysis and Results

The fifth priority area of the "Action Strategy on the Five Priority Directions of Development of the Republic of Uzbekistan for 2017–2021," adopted in 2017—ensuring security, inter-ethnic harmony, and religious tolerance—created the political and legal foundation for a radical review of the country's religious and educational policy [1]. Within the framework of this strategy, 42 regulatory legal acts related to the field were adopted during 2017–2021. These documents were aimed at improving the activities of religious organizations, developing the religious education system, strengthening religious tolerance, and enhancing the religious and educational literacy of the population.

One of the legal foundations of the reforms was the Presidential Decree No. UP-5416 of April 16, 2018, "On Measures to Radically Improve Activities in the Religious and Educational Sphere" [2]. The decree put forward the idea of "enlightenment against ignorance" as its core concept and outlined tasks such as broadly promoting the true humanistic essence of religion, values like goodness, peace, and humanity, thoroughly studying the scientific and spiritual heritage of ancestors, and shaping the worldview of the younger generation on the basis of enlightenment. Decisions aimed at refining the

activities of the Committee on Religious Affairs strengthened the institutional mechanisms for managing the religious and educational sphere.

As a practical manifestation of these reforms, the establishment of the Center of Islamic Civilization in 2017 carried special significance. The Center became the main institutional mechanism for the scientific study, preservation, and promotion of the heritage of ancestors who made immense contributions to Islamic and world civilization. During this period, the International Islamic Academy (currently named the International Academy of Islamic Studies) was formed, and the activities of the Imam Bukhari and Imam Termizi International Research Centers were established. A total of 1,670 students studied at the International Islamic Academy, with 1,430 at the bachelor's, 240 at the master's, and 83 at the doctoral levels [3]. The increase in the number of secondary special Islamic educational institutions (madrasahs) from 9 to 10 demonstrated the expansion of the religious education network.

During 2018–2021, cooperation between Uzbekistan and Malaysia in the educational sphere moved beyond general political statements and assumed a practical form through joint faculties, university branches, memorandums, and academic exchange programs. The establishment of the Uzbek-Malaysian joint faculty based at the Tashkent Institute of Finance in 2018–2019 was one of the stages of this process [4]. The faculty officially began operations in 2019 and initially planned to admit 50 master's students annually in the fields of finance and banking. In subsequent stages, the issue of expanding into international audit and Islamic banking specialties was also raised. This faculty emerged as one of the first major pilot projects directly linking the higher education systems of the two countries.

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The opening of Binary International University (BIU) in Urgench in 2020 in cooperation with Binary University of Management and Entrepreneurship (Malaysia) created a new form of institutional collaboration [5]. As the first branch of a Malaysian university in Uzbekistan, this higher education institution offered modern educational programs in management, information technology, and entrepreneurship.

The signing of Memorandums of Understanding between

the Graduate School of Business and Management of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the International Centre for Education in Islamic Finance (INCEIF), and Putra Business School in February 2020 held particular significance [6]. These documents formed the legal framework for academic cooperation in Islamic finance education, enabling religious and educational collaboration to transcend purely religious knowledge and integrate with modern economic disciplines such as Islamic finance.

On December 28, 2020, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between Karakalpak State University and City University Malaysia [7]. The document provided for the implementation of academic programs, faculty professional development, student exchange, organization of conferences, joint scientific research, and preparation of scientific publications. These agreements demonstrated that the cooperation was transitioning from isolated events to a systematic academic partnership.

In 2021, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between Navoi State Pedagogical Institute and Management and Science University (Malaysia) [8]. It defined prospects for organizing pedagogical courses, student and postgraduate exchanges, joint research, as well as opening research centers specialized in studying the halal industry and Islamic heritage. This direction clearly highlighted the complex nature of religious and educational cooperation at the intersection of education, science, and economic activities.

In the sphere of capacity building and professional development, the Malaysian Technical Cooperation Programme (MTCP) served as an important mechanism. To date, 816 specialists from Uzbekistan have participated in short-term courses and seminars under this program [9].

Another direction of religious and educational cooperation during 2019–2021 took shape in pilgrimage tourism (Ziyarah tourism), promotion of Islamic heritage, and scientific-educational ties. In 2020, the Embassy of Uzbekistan in Malaysia held a series of meetings with the Minister of Religious Affairs of Malaysia, the management of the Islamic Tourism Centre, and major travel companies. As a result of negotiations, agreements were reached on developing pilgrimage tourism, promoting initial ideas for the "Umrah Plus" program, and promoting Uzbekistan's sacred heritage sites during Friday prayers.

The signing of several Memorandums of Understanding between Uzbekistan's Islamic research institutes and the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM) on June 4, 2020, elevated scientific and educational cooperation to a new level [10]. These documents specified areas such as conducting research on Muslim scientific heritage and enlightened Islam, organizing joint conferences, studying ancient manuscripts in Uzbekistan, faculty professional development, and establishing student exchanges. Through these mechanisms, an opportunity emerged to connect Uzbekistan's rich Islamic-scientific heritage with Malaysia's modern research experience.

In the economic and standardization-related direction of religious and educational relations, initial steps were also taken during this period. In the field of halal certification, initial cooperation was established in 2018 between the "Uzstandard" Agency and the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) [11]. This collaboration created an institutional foundation for harmonizing Uzbekistan's market for halal products and services with international standards, utilizing Malaysia's experience in the halal industry, and expanding this area in the future.

In May 2024, Prime Minister of Malaysia Anwar Ibrahim paid an official visit to Uzbekistan. As part of the visit, a pilgrimage was organized to the Hazrati Imam Bukhari complex in Samarkand [12]. Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim issued special instructions to the Minister of Religious Affairs of Malaysia and the Director-General of JAKIM to develop practical cooperation mechanisms with Uzbekistan in the fields of Hadith studies, Islamic education, and enlightenment.

The official visit of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev to Malaysia on February 4–5, 2025, marked a qualitatively new stage in bilateral relations. At the conclusion of the visit, a Joint Statement titled "On Deepening Bilateral Cooperation Towards Strategic Partnership for Future Generations" was signed [13]. More than 8 agreements and protocols were signed in the fields of higher education, culture, halal conformity assessment, academic-diplomatic cooperation, customs affairs, healthcare, and smart cities. As a result of the visit, Hadith studies, Islamic civilization research, and the halal ecosystem were designated as new strategic priorities in the educational, religious, and enlightenment spheres.

In May 2026, the Queen of Malaysia and Chancellor of

Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Raja Zarith Sofiah, visited Uzbekistan [14]. The significance of this visit lies in the new institutional agreements that emerged in the scientific and educational fields in its wake. In June 2026, a Memorandum of Cooperation was signed between the Center of Islamic Civilization in Uzbekistan, the Imam Maturidi International Scientific Research Center, and the National University of Malaysia (UKM) [15].

While 25 agreements and memorandums were signed between higher education institutions during 2022–2023, the collaboration network between the universities of both nations expanded significantly by 2025. On February 4, 2025, the first Uzbekistan–Malaysia Education Forum titled "Opportunities and Initiatives in Higher Education to Achieve Sustainable Development Goals" was held in Kuala Lumpur [16]. At the forum, Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovations Kongratbay Sharipov and Minister of Higher Education of Malaysia Datuk Seri Dr. Zambry Abdul Kadir delivered speeches, noting that higher education cooperation between the two countries had reached a new milestone. More than 50 new cooperation documents were signed during the forum. As of 2025, a total of 94 agreements, contracts, and memorandums are active between the higher education institutions of both countries. Furthermore, 195 Uzbek professors and teachers completed professional development courses in Malaysian educational institutions, while 230 Malaysian professors were engaged in the educational process at Uzbek universities [17].

Among the new directions, the collaboration of Tashkent State University of Law with Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, and Universiti Malaya in Islamic law and finance assumed particular importance. Joint educational programs were developed in "green economy", artificial intelligence, Islamic banking, and metatechnologies.

In May 2024, the Malaysian organization Q Study World, in cooperation with the Uzbekistan Youth Association, opened an educational center in Tashkent [18]. In 2025–2026, schoolteachers from Jizzakh and Tashkent participated in international qualification courses at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) and the Human Resource Development Corporation training centers [19]. Thus, the collaboration was not limited to higher education but also encompassed school education and the professional development of educators.

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In February 2025, an international roundtable titled "Cultural Heritage: A Bridge Between Uzbekistan and Malaysia" was held at the Islamic Arts Museum in Kuala Lumpur. During the event, the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC-IIIT) signed Memorandums of Understanding with the Center of Islamic Civilization in Uzbekistan, as well as the Imam Bukhari, Imam Maturidi, and Imam Termizi International Research Centers [20]. As a result of the roundtable, the Joint Uzbek-Malaysian Scientific Society was established. This society assumed the responsibility of bringing together leading researchers in the field of Islamic civilization, conducting joint research and academic publications, and coordinating academic exchanges.

On May 30, 2024, the IV International Scientific-Practical Conference "Scholars of Islamic Civilization" was held in Tashkent in cooperation between the Center of Islamic Civilization and the Institute of Islam Hadhari (UKM). Modern approaches to studying the heritage of Imam Bukhari were discussed at the conference [21]. During 2024–2025, concrete mechanisms were developed for manuscript research, Hadith studies, and the operational launch of the "Umrah Plus" pilgrimage program.

In May 2026, an international conference titled "Scientific Traditions in Islamic Civilization: Resources, Potential, and Challenges" was held at the Center of Islamic Civilization in Tashkent under the leadership of the Queen of Malaysia and Chancellor of Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Raja Zarith Sofiah. The event was attended by over 300 scholars, ministers, and experts. At the conclusion of the conference, 5 new Memorandums of Understanding were signed between UTM and Uzbek institutions. Furthermore, Malaysia's Nasrul Quran organization donated 20,000 copies of the Holy Quran to the Waqf Foundation of Uzbekistan [22].

A Memorandum of Cooperation was signed between the Center of Islamic Civilization in Uzbekistan, the Imam Maturidi International Scientific Research Center, and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (National University of Malaysia). The signing ceremony was attended by Firdavs Abdukhalikov, Director of the Center of Islamic Civilization; Professor Dato' Dr. Sufian Jusoh, Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia;

Professor Dr. Fariza Md Sham, Director of the Institute of Islam Hadhari at UKM; Komiljon Shermukhamedov, Director of the Imam Maturidi International Scientific Research Center; and representatives of the scientific and academic communities of both countries. The distinctive aspect of this tripartite agreement is that expanding scientific-educational cooperation, conducting joint research, and launching academic exchange programs were designated as key priorities. While Professor Dato' Dr. Sufian Jusoh, Vice-Chancellor of UKM, emphasized the importance of broadening cooperation between scholars of the two nations, Professor Dr. Fariza Md Sham, Director of the Institute of Islam Hadhari, and Komiljon Shermukhamedov, Director of the Imam Maturidi Center, focused on the harmony between modern science and Islamic enlightenment, the execution of joint research projects, and the development of international research platforms [23].

4. Conclusion

In the future, it is advisable to systematically expand relations between the Center of Islamic Civilization in Uzbekistan, the Imam Bukhari, Imam Maturidi, and Imam Termizi International Scientific Research Centers, and the leading universities of Malaysia. It is necessary to increase joint scientific projects on Hadith studies, Islamic civilization, manuscript research, and modern Islamic enlightenment, as well as to establish academic exchange and internship programs for young researchers. Further development of cooperation in Islamic finance, "halal" standardization, and pilgrimage tourism (Ziyarah tourism) is strongly recommended. Organizing regular scientific forums, joint publications, and digital educational platforms involving scholars from both countries will serve to popularize religious knowledge in modern formats.

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