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## HISTORY OF RELATIONS BETWEEN THE UMAYYAD CALIPHATE AND THE TURKISH KHAGAN IN FOREIGN STUDIES

N. Yuldashev

Teacher of the Joint Department of Archeology of  
Uzbekistan-China Fergana State University

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### Abstract

This article examines the emergence of the Türgesh, one of the tribes belonging to the On Oq (Ten Arrows) federation of the Western Turks, as a new imperial power in the Central Asian steppes at the end of the 7th and beginning of the 8th century, following the decline of the Western Ashina Turks. Although the Türgesh Khaganate existed for a relatively short period—approximately twenty years, mainly during the reign of Khagan Suluk—it played a significant role in both regional and transregional political systems during the first half of the 8th century. Under the military and diplomatic leadership of Suluk Khagan, the Türgesh consolidated their influence in the regions of Mawarannahr and Tokharistan and entered into geopolitical rivalry with major powers such as the Tang Empire, the Umayyad Caliphate, Tibet, and the Eastern Turks. Their active support for local populations resisting Umayyad expansion transformed the Türgesh into a key factor in the balance of power in the region. The article highlights how foreign scholarship reflects on the Türgesh Khaganate as a significant political entity in the historical processes of early 8th-century Central Asia.

**Keywords:** 6th–8th centuries CE; Chinese Empire; Eurasia; imperialism and conquest; nomads; steppes.

### INTRODUCTION

The Türgesh were one of the ten tribes of the Western Turks' On Oq federation, who replaced the Western Ashina Turks and emerged as an imperial power in the



steppes of Central Asia. Although the Turgesh Khaganate lasted for a relatively short time (approximately 20 years), it reached its peak during the reign of the dynamic and active Khagan Sulu, becoming a major power in the first half of the 8th century CE. During this period, the Turgesh stood almost on equal geopolitical footing with major powers such as the Tang Empire, the Umayyad Caliphate, Tibet, and the Eastern Turks.

The Turgesh are particularly known for their serious threat to the Umayyad Caliphate's control over Transoxiana and Eastern Khurasan (Tokharistan). They inflicted several major defeats on Muslim forces during the 720s and 730s. However, following the death of Khagan Sulu, the Turgesh Khaganate quickly disintegrated, and the Qarluqs, who migrated from the northern Tian Shan steppes, replaced them as the dominant force in the region.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY**

In various scholarly works from different countries, information can be found concerning the Arab conquest of Central Asia and the Turgesh resistance movement during this process [1]. While specialized studies on this subject are scarce in international historiography, academic works from France, Russia, Europe, the United States, Turkey, China, and Central Asian countries offer valuable insights related to this topic.

Particularly noteworthy are English-language studies, which play a crucial role in understanding early medieval Central Asian history. Scholars such as C. Beckwith, A.R. Gibb, R.N. Frye, S. Whiting Marvin, G.R. Hawting, V.L. Novak, M.D. Luse, P.B. Golden, Sharon Mosher, D. Elton, A.H. Jangebe, B. Hoberman, G.R. Hoyland, B. Jonathan, and Hugh Kennedy have all contributed to the field [2].

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The Turgesh resistance against the Umayyad expansion, and their conflict with local Central Asian rulers who collaborated with the Arabs, has been addressed in several foreign studies. For example, O.G. Bolshakov, in the final volume of his four-part series *"History of the Caliphate"* [3], describes the unrest in Transoxiana in 720 CE and mentions that Turkish forces posed a serious threat to



Arab-controlled cities like Samarkand and Bukhara [4]. However, Bolshakov primarily relies on Arab sources and does not utilize Sogdian or Chinese materials.

Jonathan Karam Skaff's work *"Sui-Tang China and Its Turko-Mongol Neighbors: Culture, Power, and Connections, 580–800"* provides extensive and valuable information about the Turgesh [5]. Skaff notes that during the formation of the Turgesh Khaganate, internal turmoil within the Arab Caliphate positioned the Tang Empire as the primary threat to the Turgesh until around 726 CE, after which this changed [6]. The Tang Emperor Xuanzong managed to contain the Turgesh threat through punitive expeditions in the late 730s [7]. Due to pressure from both the Umayyads and Tang China, the Turgesh state began to weaken. Skaff also highlights the Turgesh influence in Transoxiana. Local rulers of city-states under Turgesh control referred to themselves as "slaves" of the khagan. For instance, the ruler of Samarkand voluntarily allied himself with Khagan Sulu and even joined his personal guard but still called himself the slave of the Khagan [8]. The Turgesh occupied a significant geopolitical location—in the Ili River region, far from China's core, yet central to the geopolitics of Central Asia. They bordered the Turks to the northeast, the Tang Empire to the east, the Arabs to the west, and Tibet to the south. Although the Turgesh clashed with the Tang in 717 CE, diplomatic relations were established by 718 CE. The Tang Emperor conferred the title of "duke" upon the Turgesh Khagan—a rank one level below that of the Khitan kings [9].

The Turgesh-Umayyad rivalry is further reflected in the events of 725 CE, when envoys of Khagan Sulu attended a ceremonial audience at the Tang capital alongside delegations from the Umayyads and the Western Turks [10].

Russian historian I.M. Fil'shtinsky, known for translating key Arabic sources into Russian, has written works such as *"The Caliphate under the Umayyads (661–750)"* [11] and *"History of the Arabs and the Caliphate (750–1517)"* [12], which are relevant to this topic. He briefly discusses Khagan Sulu's siege of Samarkand in 723 and notes the liberation of the Amu Darya basin from Arab control [13].

In American historiography, Christopher I. Beckwith stands out for his comprehensive studies. His major works include *"The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia"*, *"Empires of the Silk Road"*, and others [14].



Beckwith's 1993 book, *"The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia"* [15], discusses how Sulu and the Turgesh began to reemerge as a geopolitical force as rival powers weakened. Chinese historian Sima Guang notes that Sulu officially declared himself khagan in late 716 CE, marking a turning point toward Turgesh revival. By May 717, they had largely restored their former status. Chinese sources from this period suggest that Turgesh embassies to the Tang court were possibly used for espionage and reconnaissance under the guise of diplomacy [16].

Beckwith's *"Empires of the Silk Road"* also describes Central Asia—especially Ferghana—as a region of intense conflict among Arabs, Turks, Chinese, and Tibetans. After the death of Kapagan Khagan (who had departed Turgesh territory), Bilge Khagan, son of Elterish, took the throne with the help of his brother Kul Tegin. Around this time, Sulu of the Qara Suyak clan was declared khagan over the western Turks. He quickly restored Turgesh dominance and expanded the territory even more than his predecessors.

The Turgesh claimed the legacy of the Western Turkic rule over Transoxiana and Tokharistan, positioning themselves as defenders of local peoples and allies of the Tibetans against both Islamic expansion and Arab rule. The Tang Chinese, following the legacy of the Han dynasty, viewed the Turgesh-Tibetan alliance as a dangerous geopolitical alignment that could cut off China from the West. As a result, the Tang sought to undermine this alliance by forming a covert alliance with the Arabs [17].

The Turgesh ruled over key Silk Road trade cities and were seen as protectors of commerce in Dzungaria and much of Central Asia [18]. However, continuous military pressure from the Tang and Arab forces in the 730s led to the collapse of the Turgesh Khaganate between 737 and 740 CE, creating a power vacuum. This vacuum led to intertribal conflict and allowed the Arabs and Chinese to strengthen their influence over Central Asian trade cities [19].

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the relationship between the Umayyad Caliphate and the Turgesh Khaganate is regarded in foreign scholarship as a key component of 8th-century geopolitical rivalry in Central Asia. These studies emphasize how Turgesh



resistance, under Khagan Sulu, played a central role in countering the Umayyad expansion—not only through military means but also by attempting to control trade routes and form regional alliances.

In the works of scholars like Beckwith and Skaff, the Turgesh-Umayyad relationship is analyzed using Arabic, Persian, and Chinese sources, producing valuable scholarly interpretations. European, Russian, and Arab historians also portray the Turgesh as not just a geopolitical but also an ideological threat to the Umayyads. This dynamic is explored not only as a conflict between two political entities, but also in the context of Islam's expansion and the local resistance it encountered on its northern frontier.

The fall of the Turgesh Khaganate marked a turning point in the geopolitical balance of Central Asia, paving the way for increased Chinese and Arab influence. Foreign sources portray this period through a diversity of methods and materials, viewing the Umayyad-Turgesh relationship as a complex

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