

The Khazar Khaganate, a powerful Turkic empire between the 6th and 10th centuries, was known for its strategic maneuvering and pragmatic diplomacy, often prioritizing its own interests over loyalty to allies. Below, I'll outline key instances where the Khazars acted pragmatically at the expense of allies, including the specific case of the 913 CE Rus' raid, where they allowed Muslims to attack a Rus' expedition, as well as other documented examples from historical records.

The Rus' Raid of 913 CE and the Khazar Betrayal

In 913 CE, a Rus' expedition, likely led by a prince or chieftain (possibly associated with Igor of Kiev or an earlier leader like Helgu/Oleg), sought to raid Muslim territories along the Caspian Sea, targeting Abbasid Caliphate possessions in present-day Azerbaijan and northern Iran. To access the Caspian via the Volga River, the Rus' needed passage through Khazar-controlled territory. According to al-Masudi's *Muruj adh-dhahab*, the Rus' requested permission from the Khazar qağan, who granted it on the condition that they share half of their plunder upon return. This agreement allowed the Khazars to profit without engaging in the conflict, aligning with their role as gatekeepers of the Volga trade route.

The Rus' successfully raided cities like Ardabil, amassing significant spoils. However, on their return through Khazar territory, the Khazars' Muslim garrison in their capital, Itil, sought to avenge the Rus' attack on their Muslim coreligionists. The garrison, composed of mercenaries and integral to Khazar military and trade networks, requested permission to attack the Rus'. The qağan, prioritizing the loyalty of his Muslim subjects and relations with the Caliphate, allowed the ambush. Though the Khazars warned the Rus' of the impending attack, giving them a chance to prepare, they did not intervene to protect them. The Muslim forces, supported by local Christians, overwhelmed the Rus' in the Volga Delta, killing many and scattering the survivors. This passive allowance of the attack, while securing economic benefits from the initial agreement, demonstrates the Khazars' prioritization of their own stability over loyalty to the Rus'.

The Case of Justinian II and the Khazar Betrayal (704–705 CE)

Another clear instance of Khazar pragmatism involved Byzantine Emperor Justinian II and qağan Busir Glavan. In 704 or 705 CE, Justinian, deposed and exiled, sought refuge in Khazar territory. Busir welcomed him, offering asylum and arranging a dynastic marriage with his sister, Theodora, likely to bolster Khazar influence over Byzantine politics. However, when the Byzantine usurper Tiberius III offered Busir a bribe to kill or surrender Justinian, Busir accepted, prioritizing immediate financial gain and avoiding conflict with the sitting Byzantine ruler. Theodora warned Justinian, who escaped by killing two Khazar officials sent to assassinate him and fled to Bulgaria, where Khan Tervel helped him regain the Byzantine throne in 705 CE. Notably, Busir later sent Theodora to Constantinople, where she was crowned Augusta, suggesting a pragmatic restoration of ties despite the betrayal.

Khazar Relations with Muslim Powers and the Kievan Rus'

The Khazars maintained a complex relationship with the Muslim Caliphate, particularly during the 7th and 8th centuries, when they fought to block Arab expansion northward. For instance, in 652

CE, Arab forces attacked the Khazar capital, Balanjar, but were repelled with heavy losses. During the Second Muslim Civil War (683–685 CE), the Khazars raided Muslim-controlled Transcaucasian territories, exploiting Arab internal conflicts for their own gain. Despite these conflicts, the Khazars employed Muslim mercenaries and fostered thriving Muslim communities in their capital, Itil, reflecting their pragmatic tolerance to sustain trade and diplomatic ties with the Caliphate while engaging with the Rus' and Byzantines.

Regarding the Kievan Rus', the Khazars initially exerted influence over the region, with some sources suggesting that Kiev may have been founded or controlled by the Khazars before the Rus' took over in the late 9th century under Prince Oleg (c. 880 CE). The Rus' paid tribute to the Khazars, but tensions grew as the Rus' sought to dominate key trade routes, particularly the Volga and Dnieper routes, vital to Khazar wealth. The Khazars' imposition of tributes on Slavic tribes and Rus' merchants likely spurred the formation of a Rus' state to resist Khazar dominance, culminating in Sviatoslav I's campaign in 965 CE, which destroyed the Khazar fortress of Sarkel and effectively ended the Khaganate's power.

Other Instances of Khazar Pragmatism

1. **Alliance with Byzantines Against Muslims (732 CE):** The Khazars formed a dynastic alliance with the Byzantine Empire when qağan Bihar's daughter, Tzitzak, married Constantine V, aimed at countering Muslim Arab expansion. Yet, earlier raids into Muslim territories during the Second Muslim Civil War (683–685 CE) show the Khazars exploited Muslim weaknesses for their own gain, regardless of prior relations, demonstrating flexible loyalty.
2. **Conversion to Judaism (c. 740–861 CE):** The Khazar elite's adoption of Judaism under King Bulan was a strategic move to maintain neutrality between the Christian Byzantine Empire and the Muslim Caliphate. This preserved Khazar autonomy and trade relations with both powers, avoiding entanglement in their rivalry.
3. **Response to Rus' Raids (943 CE):** In 943 CE, another Rus' raid, led by Prince Igor, targeted Muslim Caspian territories. The Khazars, defending their trade interests, defeated the Rus' in the Volga Delta, prioritizing economic stability and their Muslim trading partners over potential Rus' alliances.

Conclusion

The Khazar Khaganate's history is characterized by pragmatic, self-serving decisions, such as allowing their Muslim garrison to ambush the Rus' in 913 CE after profiting from their raid, betraying Justinian II in 704–705 CE for a bribe, and exploiting Muslim weaknesses during the 683–685 CE civil war. Their adoption of Judaism, tolerance of Muslim communities, and flexible alliances with Muslim, Christian, and Rus' powers underscore their focus on survival and economic gain in a volatile geopolitical landscape. The 913 CE incident, documented by al-Masudi, and their broader relations with the Rus' and Muslims, strained ties with the Rus', contributing to tensions that led to Sviatoslav I's destruction of the Khaganate in 965 CE. For further details, consult al-Masudi's *Muruj adh-dhahab*, D.M. Dunlop's *The History of the Jewish Khazars*, or the Russian Primary Chronicle.