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### **KYRGYZSTAN-TAJIKISTAN-UZBEKISTAN: FERGHANA VALLEY**

From the beginning of the Soviet Union, the Ferghana Valley, a traditional geocultural unit, has been under increasing pressures from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan to develop three specific national identities, which are increasingly giving rise to ethnic borders tensions in a context where natural resources, environmental tension, and economic tensions are contributing to changing the identity and culture of the valley.



## Introduction

Divided between Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the Ferghana Valley (a toponym of probable Persian origins meaning *land of passage*) is one of the most populated, disputed and discussed transborder regions of post-soviet Central Asia. Parceled out for the first time at the founding of the Soviet Union and the creation of the Soviet republics, the region has seen its borders undergo a slow process of materialization, which has led to a rise of conflicts since the start of the post-soviet era. If there were many reasons— economic, political, ethnic, historical, and so on – for the first division of the territory in the early 1920s, its remarkable resources have come to dominate border conflicts over time as territorial actors exploit power rivalries to control them. Today, this region is among the most contentious areas of the former Soviet Union; conflicts ignited after the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The latest result of this phenomenon that now mainly involves the three nations-States is a deep nationalization of the territories and issues around the main traditional characteristics of the population: religion, multiethnicity and multilingualism.

## Physical and Topographical Features of the Disputed Area

The Ferghana Valley is a Central Asian region of about 13 million inhabitants surrounded by some of the highest mountains in the world. It is divided between three states: Uzbekistan, which controls more than half of the total 27,500 square kilometers of the valley; Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Approximately 100 kilometers long and 70 kilometers wide, its natural borders are defined by several mountain ranges: the Tien Shan, Čaktal, Kurama in the northwest, and the Ferghana, Turkestan and Alaj in the southeast. Together, they form a crown around the valley, separating each part from the other national territories and capitals.

In this arid zone, the Ferghana stands out as a fertile region because two water sources, the Naryn and the Kara Darya Rivers, start in Kyrgyzstan and meet in the Uzbekistani Ferghana to form the second-longest river of Central Asia, the Syr Darya, which runs to the southwest through the Tajikistani Ferghana before leaving the valley. Formerly, the Ferghana had more extensive desert areas, but starting in the nineteenth century, much of the valley was irrigated via artificial waterways, the largest of which, the *Great Ferghana*, was created in the late 1930s during the Soviet era. It is 270 kilometers long, and it allowed the development of intensive agriculture. Between the mountains and the arid central plain, the foothills contain the valley's main urban centers.

## History

Before the arrival of the Russians in the 1870s, the Ferghana Valley was the political, economic and cultural heart of the Khanate of Kokand, a political structure that emerged in the early seventeenth century and brought for the first time political homogeneity to the geographical unit. During the time of the Khanate, the Ferghana and its commercial and manufacturing activities - concentrated in the major cities of Kokand, Andijan, Namangan, Margilan and Osh - became a place of attraction and a center of immigration from all Central Asian regions.

As in the rest of Central Asia, the ethnic and social fabric of the Ferghana valley is characterized by two binary groups whose relations can be conflictual: nomadic tribes that speak Turkic-Mongol languages along with sedentary populations of Persian origin. The classical division, much sharper during the pre-Russian era, is challenged by the figure of the Sarts, a social group that was predominantly urban and composed both of Persian and Turkic-Mongol speakers. However, the debate is still acute among experts on this population and its characteristics.

Still, social traits (sedentary, nomadic, seminomadic) are much more relevant than ethnic ones to

understand the structure of the population of the Ferghana. Ethno-linguistics components crossed over social categories, as the traditional Ferghana counted, for example, Persian-speaking semi-nomadic or nomadic peoples and completely settled Turkic-speaking groups.

The main social groups that, during the Soviet era, became “nationalities” are the Kirgiz (the largest Turkic-nomadic population in the Ferghana region), the Uzbeks (sedentary Turkic-speaking populations settled in urban and rural areas) and the Tajiks (Persian-speaking people mainly settled but also seminomadic). At that time, the three main nationalities (*Nacional'nosti*) were growing rapidly, and other groups were decreasing. Pressure exerted by the Russian colonizers to simplify the territory's social pattern also meant the artificial absorption of the many minorities of the Ferghana into the major census categories. While these minorities—Sarts, Kipčak, Turks of the Ferghana, Uighurs, Jews, Gypsies, Tatars, Kazakhs, Kurama, and Karakalpaks – used to play a full role in the complex multiethnic social fabric of the Ferghana, with Russian colonization and its social and administrative organization, Ferghanian society slowly lost its multiethnic character and was redefined according to the three ethnicities which became nationalities: the Uzbeks, the Tajiks and the Kirgiz.

## **Politics and Culture**

The Ferghana region is very industrialized, especially the Uzbekistani part, but agriculture is still the main economic activity and is centered primarily on cotton. Already important during the pre-Russian period of the Khanate of Kokand (1709-1876), this culture developed rapidly during the tsarist period (1876-1917) and later the Soviet era, when the Ferghana became a true factory of cotton at the expense of forests and pastures. Today, particularly in the Uzbekistani and Tajikistani parts, the Ferghana valley remains a major cotton production area, even though the post-Soviet authorities are now seeking to diversify production and convert many farms.

Tsarist colonization of what became the Ferganskaja Oblast' (Region of Ferghana), even though it meant that sovereignty was transferred to the Russian empire and that the local political structure lost its independence, did not fundamentally change the territory of the Ferghana.

However, it was a different situation during the Soviet era, when the region was first divided into Soviet Republics. The Ferghana lost its independence with the imperial colonization, but it is only with the USSR that it lost his administrative unit. Many reasons motivated these geopolitical divisions, which emerged in the 1920s.

## **Economic reasons**

The Ferghana was always one of the most fertile and productive Central Asian territories. With the redivision of Central Asia under the Soviets, the wealth of Ferghana was to be distributed to make each new entity a territory that would be economically viable.

## **Ethnic-political reasons**

Each nationality had to have its own republic, and each republic had to have its own territory. With the territorial division of the region between two political actors in 1924 (the Uzbek Socialistic Soviet Republic and the Kara-Kirgiz Autonomous Region) and three in 1929 (also the Tajik SSR), people had to define themselves as being part of one of three official nationalities and, as much as possible, part of the corresponding republic.

## Political-ideological reasons

Lenin and Stalin were convinced that recognizing different nationalities and giving them equal status in a self-managed model of autonomy that included "modern" nations with their own elites and their own language would still allow the central power to exploit the natural resources of the regions while wrapping Soviet exploitation in a different paper than the bold colonialism that characterized the Russian imperial period. To that end, the nation-State became the main actor, the new frame of reference for the political identity of the new Soviet citizens.

Multiethnic par excellence, the Ferghana did not fit this national model, which is why despite attempts by local elites to maintain an administrative unity, it did not, - it could not - remain a united region.

## Historical reasons

In the late nineteenth century, colonization of this very religious and remote region was neither simple nor quick, and the Ferghana was the scene of numerous rebellions – the Andijan revolt in 1898, during which a movement with a strong religious component rose against the expropriation of land in favor of *moujiks* in the eastern valley; the attempt to proclaim the provisional autonomy of the government of Kokand in 1917; and the *Basmachi* movement that started in the 1920s, of which Ferghana was one of the centers. The principle of *divide et impera* (divide and rule) was reason for the geopolitical divisions in this difficult region.

In 1924, the Ferghana valley was divided between the Uzbek SSR and the Kara-Kirgiz AO (now Kyrgyzstan), a province of the Kirgiz ASSR (now Kazakhstan).

The first territorial disputes started immediately in 1924. The border proposed by the commission for the national-territorial delimitation – according to the soviet policy of *Rasmegevanie*, the territorialization of the nationalities - prompted numerous protests and petitions.

Major disputes developed along the Uzbek-Kirgiz southeastern border, from Aim, located between Jalal-Abad and Andijan, all the way to Isfara.

The main objections concerned the Uzbekistani side that claimed ethnic-based territories (i.e., territories with an Uzbek majority) or, if the claimed territory had no Uzbek-majority territories, they based their claims on ancient and strong economic ties. Such claimed territories were Aim, Osh, Aravan, and Bazar-Kurgan.

On the Kara-Kirgiz side, though the new republic received two major cities - Osh and Jalal-Abad - to enable its development, they were not predominantly Kirgiz (Osh's population was 97% Uzbek), and pressure was exerted for Kara-Kirgiz to obtain other strategic territories: Chimion, Maniyak, Kara-Suu, Korgon-Tobe, Harin, Markhamat, Kulu, Jalal-Kunduk, Bulak-Bashi, Uch-Kurgan, and Vuadil. There was also a petition by the Kirgiz people of Andijan, who wanted the city to join Kara-Kirgiz.

All these events demonstrated the importance of social and economic distinctions, rather than the ethnic and national distinctions within Ferghanian territory. For example, Uzbek claims included the territories of Kashgar-Kishlak in the *uezd* (province) of Osh, and Kanabad in the *uezd* of Jalal-Abad, not for ethnic but for economic reasons, as these territories had the water resources necessary for the production of cotton in Uzbekistani Ferghana. No matter its true basis, however, every claim would always first appeal to ethnic grounds or cultural proximity. For example, to obtain the Tajik-inhabited territory of Uch-Kurgan, the Kirgiz would claim territories of nomadic Kipchaks and Karakalpaks, while the Uzbekistani authorities would argue that the Tajiks were always culturally closer to the Uzbeks than to the Kirgiz people.

This proves that people on the ground and the authorities had realized that the map of nationalities had become an important ideology that they started to mobilize, to legitimize their claims. It was only when the national fable did not support the dispute that economic or geopolitical grounds were expressed, such as in the cases of Chimion and Vuadil, two important commercial centers that

organized market activities for the surrounding areas.

There were many attempts to change the border between 1924 and 1927, and several committees of experts from Moscow, Tashkent, Frunze, and Ferghana were asked for good solutions. One of the most interesting cases was that of Aim, a *volost* (literally, "parish") focused around a village separated by the Kara-Darya River. The inhabitants of the southern side of the Kara-Darya River drafted a petition asking Moscow to allow them to join the Uzbek RSS for ethnic (Uzbek majority) and economic (strong ties with Andijan) reasons, adding that although there were Kirgiz people in Aim, "for the language, customs, culture and economy they were closer to Uzbeks than to Kirgiz". In this case, the ethnic fable is completely failed the local people, who did not question it but used its weaknesses to fuel their own requests.

Obviously, the facts of Aim were not overlooked in Frunze, which repressed the Ferghanian village. After several requests for help and evaluation committees, the southern part of Aim finally passed to the Uzbek SSR in the spring of 1927. In return, the Kara-Kirgiz OA won Tajik-populated Uch-Kurgan. Two explanations were given to this distribution of territory: the economic and strategic importance of the territory and that the Kara-Kirgiz OA offered Tajiks greater safety than they would find as part of the Uzbek SSR, noticeably on the linguistic level, where protection was provided through Tajik-speaking schools and other institutions. Coming from the Russian authorities, this last argument seemed to contradict the fact that they had created a Tajik Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within the Uzbek SSR itself. However, it was argued that because Tajiks were culturally closer to Uzbeks than to Kirgiz, they would not risk forcible cultural absorption if they were integrated into the Uzbek SSR; such absorption could be prevented only if their identities were protected institutionally, and the Tajik ASSR offered this type of protection. As this entity was too far away for Uch-Kurgan to join, the best solution was for them to join the Kara-Kirgiz. This apparent logic from the Russian authorities does not deny that the Tajik Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was nothing less than culturally homogeneous and that its mountains hosted mostly Kirgiz and other nomadic minorities, another proof that the scientific ethnic discourse was in reality flexible, subject to distortions under the imperative of political realism.

The "territorial exchanges" lasted until 1927, with a last geopolitical update in 1929 when the Tajik Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of the Uzbek SSR was transformed into an independent SSR. According the "geopolitics of the cotton", the Tajik Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, which was a remote mountainous territory, needed fertile land upon independence, in order to have agriculture, and especially to produce cotton. The mountainous SSR whose population had slightly more urban Persian speakers than nomadic Turkic speakers (120,000 vs. 80,000), hence received the western part of Ferghana, including the city of Khojent, the last Alexandria founded by Alexander the Great.

Since 1929, the territory of Ferghana has been divided into three political and administrative entities, and counts eight enclaves that were set up for various reasons (ethnic, strategic, religious). There are four Uzbekistani enclaves in Kyrgyzstani territory (Sokh, Shakhimardan, Kalacha and Kalmion), two Tajikistani in the Kyrgyzstani territory (Voruh and Kajragach), one Tajikistani in Uzbekistan (Sarvak), and one Kyrgyzstani in Uzbekistan (Barak). This last enclave does not appear on official maps of Central Asian countries. The existence of this portion of Kyrgyzstan in Uzbekistan is certain, but its precise geographical location is not known. The majority of experts put it a few kilometers away from the border of Kara-Suu, in the Andijan oblast; others, such as Rolf Palmer, locate between the cities of Ferghana and Margilan.

Two additional committees on border demarcation were established during the Soviet era, in 1939 and 1955. But for the republics of that time and their people, territorial demarcation held less meaning and importance. Despite cartographic territorial boundaries, the territories were still within the Soviet context, and boundaries did not play a limitative role in the daily lives of local people. This division, which followed the nationalist canons of the Soviet Union, was a decision made by the central government to facilitate land management in the Ferghana and to acquire the support of local elites of the three new entities who saw an opportunity to expand their territories in this rich region. The population of the Ferghana still could move freely among the various republics; there

were no checkpoints, and the only requirement was to have the *Pasport Grashdanina* (internal passport). The territory, divided by internal Soviet borders, remained perfectly integrated; for example, children could attend the nearest school even if it was in another republic, while some Tajikistani sovkhozes extended into official Kyrgyzstani territories. Intra-Soviet boundaries remained virtually invisible during the first years after the fall of the Soviet system. The only border problem that appeared before the late 1990s occurred in 1993, when the President of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, closed the borders with Kyrgyzstan when the country left the Russian ruble zone in order to prevent money flows through the territory of valley. Custom posts were established but still did not impose a real limitation on the population, which continued to move freely.

It is only from 1999 that boundaries started materializing in the valley. On February 13, 1999, the bus line between Osh and Andijan was suddenly interrupted. Subsequently, many other public transport services were suspended. Karimov explained that his decision was based on poverty in Kyrgyzstan; he wanted to defend the Uzbekistani territory and economy by preventing Kyrgyzstanis from entering and spreading poverty. This move was later formalized with the decree of March 1<sup>st</sup> 2000, which established that non-Uzbekistani citizens can enter the country without an official visa only if they do not stay longer than three days.

A few days later, in February 1999, a series of bombings struck the Uzbekistani capital, and a politicized Islamic fundamentalist movement, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), claimed responsibility, saying their aim was to abolish the state and the create a caliphate in the valley. Karimov then decided to complete the materialization of Uzbekistani borders, first with Kyrgyzstan in 1999 and with Tajikistan in 2001. Although the Kyrgyzstani government began a process of alliance with Uzbekistan in the fight terrorism, the Uzbekistani leader's will to keep the border closed remained strong. It became necessary to reorganize the Kyrgyzstani part of Valley. Among the major changes was the construction of new roads and of the province of Batken, which was born from the detaching Osh to better manage the southern Kyrgyzstani appendix that had become completely landlocked. Meanwhile, Uzbekistan, to protect itself from the "fundamentalist fury", began to erect barriers of barbed wire on the border with Kyrgyzstan and install minefields in agricultural land along the border with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. After 2001, at the end of three years of fighting against the IMU, tensions began to alleviate, and the guerrillas ceased their activity, although sporadic attacks continue to occur even in the border customs posts.

When the borders of Ferghana were created, they did not divide the population. They became a divisive element with the appearance of the nationalist factor. With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and further transformation of the RSS into three independent republics, the borders became international. Without the Soviet superstructure, the "three Ferghanas" began to have divergent economic, cultural, and social viewpoints, and their borders became real barriers to the multiplicity and daily trade that once took place throughout the Ferghana Valley. Following the terrorist attacks by IMU, the Tajik civil war brought an Islamist party to power, and the with economic threat that followed the sudden opening of Kyrgyzstan to international markets and investments, the government of Uzbekistan was the first to decide to close its borders in the Ferghana Valley with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Three types of disputes emerged with materialization of the borders:

The first is resource management disputes among the three independent republics. The most significant case involves water reserves. Toktogul in Kyrgyzstan and Kairakkum in Tajikistan used to provide the western territories of the Uzbek and Kazakh SSR with water. The water reserves were built in Soviet times, when borders were more virtual than real. With independence, the republics that 'owned' the reserves began to use them as means of retaliation vis-à-vis the "dependent" republics; for example, it happened that Uzbekistan suspended gas supplies to Kyrgyzstan due to late payments, and then Kyrgyzstan turned on the Toktogul hydropower plant, resulting in swelling of the Naryn Basin and the Syr Darya; flooding occurred not only in targeted Uzbek cotton plantations but also all the way to Kazakhstan.

The second issue involved restricting relations among the people of the valley, which has created a social unease in the population of the transborder region. This is not a proper interstate dispute. It is

not new that closing a border is used as a symbol, a visible mark of the new, independent national sovereignty. However, in the case of the Ferghana, for centuries the valley had been the main territorial frame of reference. Thus, marking boundaries also resulted in a shift in people's primary territorial representations, from the trans-border valley to the bordered nation-states. This cultural, nationalistic change was accompanied by a focus on the ethnicity as a main identity criteria, as it had become the basis of the national unity and legitimacy. Public discourse encouraged people to consider others foreigners if they were not of one's own national ethnicity, a shift that was facilitated by decreasing traditional exchanges among the local population. The situation was particularly complicated on the Tajik-Uzbek border because of the permanent visa program established by Uzbekistan in the early 2000s. Kyrgyzstan, however, still does not have a visa program with Tajikistan, which allows a portion of the population of Ferghana to move rather freely, although the time needed to cross the border checkpoint on each side and the no man's land acts as an obstacle, if not a proper barrier, to circulation. As a result, the borders hinder trade and social relations. Families are now separated because crossing takes time and is not guaranteed, either because of corrupt border guards or by the simple closure of checkpoints, which can last for several months in times of increased tensions.

The third type of dispute that emerged with materialization of the borders involves proper and official border conflicts, which have occurred more frequently with increasing ethnic and national differentiations, rivalries between nation-states, and policy discourse that emphasizes an ethnic-centered vision of national identity and territory, despite the long tradition of multiethnicity in the territories considered. An example is *creeping migration*, which occurs when Kyrgyzstanis illegally sell homes along the border to Tajiks of Tajikistan. Though this phenomenon has its roots in local migratory patterns and the traditional solidarity of border society, has been the subject of a national debate and was placed on the Kyrgyzstani parliamentary agenda in the following terms: the border was "moving", causing Kyrgyzstani territory to become Tajik and would end in Kyrgyzstanis being absorbed by Tajikistan. The government went so far as to urge Kyrgyz citizens to defend their national territory and considered economic incentives for Kyrgyzstanis who would "become active in civic defense of the border".

Another example, though the role of the governments is more indirect than in the previous case, is the outburst of interethnic violence in Osh, Kyrgyzstan, in June 2010, which arose due to Kyrgyzs to Uzbeks. The former president of Kyrgyzstan, who was exiled in Belarus, was key in triggering what can be called a pogrom among populations who long lived together in southern Kyrgyzstan and who are bound by many ties - interethnic marriages, common Sunni Muslim obedience, and social exchanges in the Osh region. For a long time, during the Khanate of Kokand and later under the Russian imperialist political structure, there was no form of daily ethno-identity. The fall of the USSR and the emergence of independent nation-states that were based on Soviet redefinition of the region based on ethnicity and whose stability depended upon their legitimacy led to the emergence of discourse and policies that enhance feelings of ethnicity. Thus, although they are Kyrgyzstani citizens, the Uzbek minorities in Kyrgyzstan has become strangers in the eyes of the Kyrgyz of Kyrgyzstan and are increasingly victims of the discourse of national priority, especially as the economic success of urbanites fuels envy and anger among the Kyrgyz, who face rural landlessness and housing problems because of overcrowding. It was then said, "Gangs from campaigns had descended in the city of Osh to take the houses and stores of Uzbeks people". The flare-up of this conflict led to a bureaucratic closing of the borders between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and the reintroduction of the visa program. In this case, the ideological-representative conflict has led to the creation of further limitations of cross-border relations in the region, in a true Catch-22 situation.

Although state boundaries have tremendously materialized in the past years, remaining territorial disputes make it so that there are still nondelimited areas between the three republics.

In 2009, the Ferghanian parts of the Uzbekistani-Tajikistani border became completely defined with the settlement of the remaining 1,280 kilometers of borders. Still, the visa program persists, as do some Uzbekistani minefields that continue to defy the mine-free action programs.

Between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, however, about 970 kilometers of border are still not delimited



in the Isfara valley, where the creeping migration took place. Delimiting these borders is very difficult because they were concretely marked during the Soviet period, nor were the people in this area subject to a visa program in the post-Soviet period. The Isfara Valley remains the most difficult border area because the land is fertile, and its repartition is therefore an important issue for both republics. In addition, Soviet mapping is not completely trustworthy due to significant differences in the maps of 1930, 1960 and 1970.

Disputes between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan over Ferghanian boundaries draw serious concern. There are approximately 1,000 kilometers of borders, disputes over the course of which relate particularly to the Uzbekistani enclaves in Kyrgyzstan. While some sources say there are 130 kilometers still to be delimited - centered on the two major enclaves of Soh and Shakhimardan, whose outskirts have been mined by Uzbekistan - other sources say there are still 300 kilometers to be resolved, including another part in addition to the enclaves. Recent agreements between the two countries, in 2004 and 2011, focus on the Shakhimardan enclave, a rich valley in the province of Batken that used to be a zone of tourism for the Uzbekistani *nomenklatura* during the Soviet era. Kyrgyzstan accused Uzbekistan of misappropriating this territory during the 1930s. In 2011, there were still 62 areas that had not been delineated. Finding a solution has been made more complicated by the clashes of 2010 and the subsequent restoration of the visa program and closure of 10 checkpoints on the Uzbekistani side.

With the emergence of multiform limitations of cross-border relations, the already important smuggling of goods increased in the region, as did drug trafficking, due to the location of the three southern central Asian states on the route of Afghan drugs take throughout of the region.

After installing mine fields and checkpoints on main roads, Uzbekistan began to talk about materializing portions of "green borders", fencing about 600 kilometers along its border with Kyrgyzstan. Plans for a border wall along the southeastern part of the border were also considered, but only for a few kilometers. This new project, which aims to close the main areas of Ferghanian cross-border exchanges, has been developed without any agreement from the neighboring country.

## Conclusion

The Uzbekistani government, the leader of border closures and materialization in the Ferghana, clearly wants to isolate its part of Ferghana from the rest of the valley, and to orientate it towards Tashkent. The new and unique cultural, economic and social reference point of Ferghana has to be the nation, an ideology that remains so far incompatible with cross-border cooperation. The locked border, the increasing isolation of each part of the region, the disputes and issues related to the passage, the development of national identity, and the consequent increase of "ethnic border" tensions in a context of resource, environmental and economic tensions are completely changing the face, identity, and culture of this region. From being a geo-cultural unit, the Ferghana valley has become a trans-border region - but for how long? Continued attempts to dismantle the valley into three peripheral appendices of national political structures that were neither born nor designed for independence do not allow one to be optimistic about peace and security in the region.

*Isabella Damiani*

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