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Ethno-territorial conflict and coexistence in the Caucasus, Central Asia and Fereydan

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Appendix 4: Tajik Population in Uzbekistan

A widespread claim is that the number of Tajiks in Uzbekistan has been underestimated in the official censuses. It is difficult to estimate the number of Tajiks in Uzbekistan. Although the distinction between Uzbeks and Tajiks is mainly based on their distinct languages [sic!], it is nevertheless blurred. There is much controversy over the identification and delimitation of the two culturally very similar ethnic groups of Uzbeks and Tajiks and particularly over the number of the latter in Uzbekistan.

Many people known as Tajiks or Uzbeks are bilingual in the Uzbek and Tajik languages. Many people belong to mixed families and, after all, many people speak a language as their vernacular language while identifying themselves with the “other” ethnic group in daily life. This is most probably the case among many people in Uzbekistan, who, despite using Persian/Tajik in their daily life, are still aware of their Turkic(-speaking) genealogy, which places them more accurately in the Uzbek category.

The ethnonym Uzbek originally referred to a nomadic Turkic people in Central Asia. The designation “Tajik” as opposed to “Turk” seems to have been used in Central Asia as a designation of people of non-Turkic, particularly Iranian, lineage. The (ancestors of) Tajiks and Uzbeks were called Sarts, particularly by their nomadic Turkic neighbours, the Kyrgyz and Kazakhs, before the categories of Uzbek and Tajik were put into official usage and were used as census categories. The Sarts, who were seemingly the largest ethnic group in the contemporary Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, were composed of a mixture of the local Persian-speaking and settled Turkic elements. Although racially a mixture of the early Iranian²²² natives of Central Asia and the later-settled Turkic tribes, the Sarts mainly used Persian as their vernacular and literary language.

Many of my Uzbek and Tajik respondents stated that their grandparents remember the time in which they were called “Sarts”. This fact is confirmed by many of my other Tajik, Uzbek, Kazakh, and Kyrgyz respondents. The Kazakhs and Kyrgyz still refer to Uzbeks and Tajiks as

²²² The Iranian-speaking ancestors of the Sarts spoke Sogdian, a Northeast Iranian language. Later, from the 10th century onwards, Persian replaced Sogdian and other native Iranian languages of Central Asia. At the present time, only in Yaghnob Valley in Tajikistan is Sogdian language spoken by a small group of speakers. I have wondered whether or not the ethnonym Sart has something to do with the ancient ethnonym of Sogdian.

Sarts. A number of them, particularly the Kyrgyz, mentioned that the Kyrgyz refer only to Uzbeks in this way and that it is a derogatory term.²²³ Interestingly enough, some of my Turkic-speaking Uzbek respondents stated that they were in fact not Uzbeks but just Central Asian Turkic people. In addition, many Persian-speaking respondents from Samarkand and Bukhara identified themselves primarily as Samarkandi or Bukharan and not as Tajik. Many of my respondents from Uzbekistan, amongst whom were also scholars, spoke Persian—or stated that one or both of their parents or grandparents spoke it—but identified themselves, nevertheless, as Uzbeks. On the other hand, many Persian-speakers in Uzbekistan still call themselves Tajiks. According to the Uzbekistani scholar Namoz Hotamov (2001: 270-271), a number of Persian-speaking people in Uzbekistan do indeed call themselves Tajiks, but many others identify themselves as Uzbeks.

According to the late Slovak Iranologist Kamil Banak (Leiden University),²²⁴ Persian was still widely spoken in Uzbekistan in the 1970s when he visited the region. During his trip to Uzbekistan, when he asked many local people about their identity, they responded in the local dialect: “Mo mardumi musalmon, zaboni mo Forsi”. This phrase in the local Persian dialect of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan can be translated as follows in English: “We are Muslim people, [and] our language is Persian” (personal communications with Dr. Banak in 2000). John Schoeberlein provides a rich description of the situation of identity in Uzbekistan in his dissertation (Schoeberlein-Engel 1994a), titled “Identity in Central Asia: Construction and contention in the conceptions of Özbek, Tâjik, Muslim, Samarqandi and other groups”.

According to Hotamov (2001), an Uzbekistani Tajik from Bukhara, most Uzbekistani Tajiks are forcefully registered as Uzbek. They would not be offered their internal passports if they insisted on being registered as Tajiks. Even Hotamov himself, who openly speaks of his Tajikness, is registered as an Uzbek (Hotamov 2001: 271). Although their relatively large proportion in the Tajikistani population does not suggest this, probably many Uzbeks for the same reason were registered as Tajik. The registrations were not necessarily forceful. People may have opted to be registered as the titular nation because it offered them many privileges.

Hotamov (2001) distinguishes three categories of Tajiks in Uzbekistan, all of whom are registered as Uzbeks. The first category is the category of the Tajiks who speak the Tajik language and are aware of their ethnicity. Although formally registered as Uzbeks, they introduce

²²³ I was told this by many Kyrgyz scholars and ordinary people during my visit to Kyrgyzstan (summer 2008).

²²⁴ The late Dr. Banak was a professor of Persian language at Leiden University in the Netherlands (Leyden). He was originally from Slovakia.

and identify themselves as Tajiks. The second category is the category of the Tajiks who speak the Tajik language and are somewhat aware of their Tajik identity, but who introduce and identify themselves as Uzbeks. Many Uzbekistani politicians and officials can be found in this category. According to many respondents, President Karimov of Uzbekistan is probably one of them. The third category is the category of those who were originally Tajiks but are linguistically assimilated into the Turkic-speaking Uzbeks and are no longer aware of their Tajik identity.

According to the last Soviet census (1989), there were 933,560 registered Tajiks in Uzbekistan. Starting from this number, the number of Tajik population of Uzbekistan cannot be much larger now. However, according to many of my respondents, particularly Tajiks of Tajikistan, the actual number of Tajiks in Uzbekistan varies between 8 and 12 million. There are even scholars who give high estimates of the number of Tajiks in Uzbekistan. For example, Richard Foltz (1996) estimates the number of Tajiks in Uzbekistan at 20–30% of the total Uzbekistani population. Many Uzbeks of Uzbekistan, however, usually do acknowledge that the number of Tajiks is higher. As one said to me: “They are two millions, not six millions”. According to Hotamov (2001: 246), who relies on some reliable sources,²²⁵ the number of Tajiks in Uzbekistan may be 3–3.5 million persons.

Persian-speakers in Uzbekistan are mainly concentrated in the provinces of Samarkand (Samarqand), Surkhan Darya (Surxondaryo), and Bukhara (Buxoro). Samarkand counts 2,778,00, Surkhan Darya 1,255,500, and Bukhara 1,728,000 souls. A proportion of the population in these provinces are not Persian-speaking. On the other hand, Persian-speakers can also be found elsewhere in Uzbekistan. One must realize that the vernacular language and ethnic identification are not always congruent. In this case, many Persian-speakers identify themselves rather as Uzbeks than Tajiks, while many Persian- or Tajik-speakers identify themselves as Uzbeks. Hotamov’s estimate seems to be a good one if one assumes that at least half (2,875,500) of the total population (5,761,000) of the aforementioned provinces—and hence a plurality thereof—identify themselves as Tajiks.

Despite the fact that the real number of Uzbeks who identify themselves as Uzbeks is lower than the official figures, the number of Uzbeks is still the largest of all Central Asian peoples. Uzbeks in Uzbekistan outnumber other ethnic groups, amongst whom are many of their neighbouring titulars, by many times.

²²⁵ Although his article was written in 2001, his data are from the early 1990s. His information is most probably insider information which he obtained from the Uzbekistani statistical services.