



## The Situation and Languages of the Turkic Nations in Afghanistan Before August 2021

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**Abstract:** Afghanistan is one of the ancient lands where many nations and ethnic groups coexist. In this geography, besides the Turkic tribes such as the Uzbeks, Turkmens, Kyrgyz, and Kazakhs who speak their native languages even today, there are also tribes like the Hazaras, the Aimaqs, and the Galchays who – having forgotten their mother tongues – speak Persian or Pashto. In Afghanistan, where the Turkic dynasties generally ruled before 1747, the Pashtuns became the dominant ethnic community with the proclamation of the Afghan state in 1747. The turbulent history and political life of Afghanistan have deeply affected the Turkic communities, as have all Afghan peoples. The Turkic peoples were occasionally forbidden to receive education in their native tongues, while it was also aimed to change the demographic structure by resettling Pashtuns in some regions. The Soviet occupation and the ensuing civil war claimed thousands of lives and forced millions of people to leave their country. Between 2001 and 2021, the administration in Afghanistan changed hands once again as supported by the Western states; yet, there was partial relief for the Turkic peoples during this period. The developments in August 2021 dragged these peoples into uncertainty again. In this study, the situation of the Turkic peoples living in Afghanistan and the languages they use before August 2021 were assessed by providing the available information.

**Keywords:** *Afghanistan, Aimaq, Galchay, Hazara, Kataghan, Karakalpak, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Turkmen, Turkestan*

### Introduction

At a major crossroads on the Silk Road, Afghanistan is where dozens of Turkic tribes arrived, settled, and founded cities and states for centuries (Gabar, 2009). The Turkic interest in Afghanistan dates to the Scythians and Asian Huns. During their rule, the Great Hun Empire and the Gokturks conducted recurrent raids into Afghanistan. Some sources quote the Kushans and the Akhuns (Ephtalites) as the first Turkic state founders in Afghanistan. Ahmet Ercilesun explained the significance of the cultural and historical heritage these and the consecutive Turkish states inherited to one another:

“... Both the Kushans and the Akhuns prevented the Persian states from making inroads into Afghanistan and India. They laid the foundations for the successive Turkic reigns (by the Gokturks, Ghaznavids, Gurlus, and Mughals) in these regions and formed the first tier of the Turkish influence still witnessed in the cultures of Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. In particular, the

Turkish presence inherited by the Akhuns must have played a key role in the dominion of the Western Gokturks, who defeated the Akhuns in 557 collaborated by the Sassanids, in Transoxiana and Afghanistan.” (Ercilesun, 2004)

After the Gokturks, the Turkic Shahs, the Ghaznavids, the Seljukids, the Harzemshahs, the Timurids, the Safavids, the Shaybanis, the Baburids and other Central Asian khanates dominated all or parts of Afghanistan respectively. (Saray, 1997)

The Turkic communities constitute the third largest ethnic group in Afghanistan after the Pashtuns and the Tajiks. (Saray, 1997) These communities generally live in Northern Afghanistan, also called Southern Turkestan or Afghanistan Turkestan. (Akyüz, 2012)

Herat is in the south of Afghanistan and the west of Afghanistan Turkestan. From Herat to the northeast stretch the Tirbendi Turkestan and the Hindukush Mountains. The geography in the north of the region

up to the Wahan Corridor in the Pamir Region spans the natural borders of the "Great Turkestan", also called the "Ulugh Turkestan" in the past. The region south of the Amu Darya and north of the Hindukush range is geographically known as the South Turkestan or the Afghanistan Turkestan. (Jarring, 1939) To the north of the Amu Darya are Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. (Komite-i Dini Siyasi ve Ferhengi, 2011)

Afghanistan Turkestan is divided into two large regions in the west i.e., Turkestan with Sheberghan as the capital and Kataghan with Kunduz as the capital. The Kataghan region consists the Kunduz, Takhar, Samangan, Baghlan and Badakhshan provinces, and the Turkestan region consists the Jawzjan, Balkh, Faryab, Sar-e-Pol, Badghis and Herat provinces. (Oğuz, 2009)

Some of the Turkic communities in Afghanistan could preserve their native languages. Some forgot their mother tongues and now speak Dari (Persian spoken in Afghanistan) or Pashto. The Turkic communities who forgot their native languages are as follows.

### **The Hazaras**

One of the four largest groups in Afghanistan, the Hazaras make up about 9% of the country's population. (İlik, 2012) They are divided into three major tribes i.e., Behsud, Jaghori and Uruzghani. The Behsuds, termed as the Pureblood Hazaras, generally live on highlands in isolation from the other Hazara groups. The Jaghori Hazaras blend with the Pashtuns and the Tajiks in their cultural circles. The Uruzghanis mostly live in the Uruzghan and Daikondi provinces. (Komite-i Dini Siyasi ve Ferhengi, 2011) Morphologically, it is rather hard to distinguish the

Turkic communities like the Uzbeks, the Kyrgyz, and the Turkmens from the Hazaras in Afghanistan.

The Hazaras densely populate the highlands in central Afghanistan called Hazarajat or Hazaristan. The Hazarajat region consists of the provinces of Bamyan, Ghor and Daikondi. (Şeriati, 2014) Outside Hazarajat, the Hazaras mostly live in Ghazni. The Hazaras also form a considerable portion of population in Kandahar, Kabul, Herat, and Mazar-e-Sharif. In addition, large and small Hazara communities are found across Afghanistan. Although some Hazaras living in and around Herat are Sunnis, all other Hazaras adhere to the Jafari-Shiite sect. The Hazaras living in Iran are called Berbers. (İlik, 2012)

The origin of the Hazaras, who have lived in Afghanistan for centuries, are under constant discussion. While some researchers claim the Hazaras to have Mongolian, Turkic-Mongolian or Turkish origins, others attribute them to share same origins with the Circassians, the Indians, and the indigenous peoples of Afghanistan. The claim that the Hazaras are of Turkish descent is supported the most. The Hazaras differ in opinions about their ethnic origins. (Celik, 2001, p. 9)

A legend attaches the Hazara to "the descendants of the 1000 soldiers (The word *hazar* means 1000 in Persian) remaining from Genghis Khan's army". Most Hazaras attribute themselves to the lineage of Genghis Khan's soldiers. (Gabar, 2009) Considering Genghis Khan had united all steppe tribes and the Mongols constituted ten percent of his army while the Turks, the Kipchaks, the Turkmens and the Uyghurs formed the rest, and that the Eastern Turks, the Tatars and the Mongols formed a unity during the same period with

their names mentioned together, the claim the Hazaras are of Turkish ancestry stands even stronger. (Yazıcı, 2011)

However, according to some historical sources, Genghiz Khan left no soldiers in Afghanistan. There are legends about the Hazaras to have originally descended from the soldiers of Chagatai, Genghis Khan's son. In the 16th century, the Chagatai Khans dispatched large armies to conquer India and built forts and military garrisons in Afghanistan as their armies forged inland. When the Chagatai rule in Central Asia weakened, some soldiers from these Mongol armies stayed back. (Saray, 1997)

The Hazaras, who lived in a region where the Iranian languages were extensively dominant, forgot their native languages in time. Today, they speak Hazaragi, a dialect of Dari (Persian spoken in Afghanistan). Although the Hazaras in Afghanistan altered their language, they have kept their traditions and customs, and some practices linked to the ancient Turkish beliefs. (Celik, 2001, p. 10) The Hazaras enjoyed their strongest influence in Afghanistan during the reign of the Mughal Empire. (Oğuz, 2009, pp. 47-48)

#### **The Aimaqs (Char Aimaqs)**

A group of Tajikised Turkic or Mongolian origin, the Char Aimaqs are of four tribes named Ferozkohi, Taimani, Jamshedi and Taimuri. The phrase *Char Aimaq* literally means 'four tribes'. The Taimuris are Sunni, and the Ferozkohi, Taimani and Jamshedi tribes are Jafari-Shiite. It is estimated that around 450-500 thousand Char Aimaqs live in Afghanistan. Some among the Char Aimaqs are nomads and semi-nomads even now. (Oğuz, 2009, p. 43)

#### **The Afshars or the Kizilbash**

Originally from the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan, they all are of Oghuz origin. (Akyüz M., personal interviews and observations) The Afshars, who belong to the Jafari-Shiite religious denomination, are also known as the Kizilbash because of their crimson headgears. They arrived in Afghanistan in 1736 during the Afghanistan expedition of the Iranian Shah Nadir Khan Afshari. The Afshars generally live in Kabul, Mazar-e-Sharif, Hazaristan and Herat. They speak an Azerbaijani Turkish dialect native to Karabakh. With their population estimated around 60,000, the Afshars are clustered in Afshar district in Kabul and in Foladi in Hazaristan. (İlik, 2012)

#### **The Bayats**

A Jafari-Shiite community, the Bayats are a small Turkic group of Oghuz origin generally living in Herat and Kabul. Having forgotten their native language which was a dialect of Azerbaijani Turkish, they now speak Dari. (Komite-i Dini Siyasi ve Ferhengi, 2011)

#### **The Herat Turks**

Many Turkic groups live in and around Herat in western Afghanistan. The Mervi community is a heritage tribe dating to the times of the Great Seljukid and Timurid empires. This community's language bears the characteristics of Western (Oghuz) and Chagatai Turkish. Except for the elderly, no one can speak their native language. (Akyüz M. Personal interviews) Another Turkic community in the region, the Shekibanis live in the village of Shekiban near Herat and in downtown Herat. Having forgotten their native language, they speak Persian. (İlik, 2012)

#### **The Galchays**

Considered in some sources as the Akhuns or the Ghaznavids, or the descendants of the Halaj Turks, the Galchay (Galjee-Galzhay) tribe assumed the Pashtun

identity in all aspects and is one of the largest Pashtun tribes in Afghanistan. (Saray, 1997) The Galchays generally live around the city of Ghazni and some among them carry Turkish names like Erselan. (Akyüz M., Personal interviews)

The Turkic groups which preserved their native tongues in today's Afghanistan are the Uzbeks, the Kazakhs, the Kyrgyz, the Tatars, the Uyghurs and the Karakalpaks.

### **The Uzbeks**

The most populous Turkic group in Afghanistan, the Uzbeks constitute 9% of the Afghan population. They generally live in the Faryab province (in cities like Maymana, Shirintegap, Dawlatabad, Faizabad, and Anthoy), in the Jawzjan province (Sheberghan, Akcha, Darzab, Koshshatapa, and Hodjaduku), in the Balkh province (Mazar-e Sharif, Khaydarkan, Tashkurgan, Hinjan, and Khayratan), in the Samangan province (Aybak and other towns and villages), in the Sar-e-Pol, Kunduz, Takhar provinces (Taloqan and Imam Sahib), and the cities, towns and villages in the Badakhshan and Baghlan provinces. The Uzbeks make up the majority of the population in cities like Sheberghan, Maymana, Darzab, Koshshatapa, and Hodjaduku. (Jarring, 1939) They are a minority in Kabul and Herat. (Komite-i Dini Siyasi ve Ferhengi, 2011)

The remnants of the Ghaznavid, Timurid, Shibani and Babur states founded in Afghanistan throughout history, the Turkic communities form a segment of the Afghanistan Uzbeks. The Uzbeks, who had to leave their hometowns and take refuge in Afghanistan after the rebellions and wars in the West Turkestan between 1916 and 1924, form the second Uzbek community. (Saray, 1997) However, there is no social or cultural

difference between the two. (Akyüz M. Personal observations)

Reason unknown, the Uzbeks living in the west of Northern Afghanistan – also known as the Southern Turkestan – are called "Tat". Those who live in the Kataghan region in northeastern Afghanistan are called Uzbeks. The Uzbeks in these two regions speak separate dialects. However, they have common social and cultural characteristics. (Oğuz, 2009)

The language of the Uzbeks in Afghanistan has large similarities with the Kyrgyz and the Kazakh languages, and bears strong language characteristics of the Kipchak segment as compared to the Karluk segment common in Uzbekistan. The Uzbek spoken in Afghanistan has two dialects i.e., “Ya- ی” and “Jim- ج” respectively. While the “Y” dialect is common in the west i.e., Afghanistan Turkestan, the “C” dialect is widely spoken in the east i.e., the Kataghan region. (Tadaş, 2012) In addition, there are places which speak other dialects in both regions. The Uzbeks living in Darzab and Koshtapa districts of the Jawzjan province, Sancharak district of the Sar-e-Pol province, and in the Takhar and Kunduz provinces pronounce the "y" sound at the beginning of the word as the "c" sound, just like the Kyrgyz. (İlik, 2012)

The Uzbeks living in Afghanistan continue to read and write in Arabic alphabet, and use the spelling rules of the "Y" dialect and the Chagatai Turkish. In writing, additions made to the Arabic letters reflect the Uzbek sound system, and some letters from the New Uyghur Turkish Arabic Alphabet are used. For example, in addition to the non-Arabic letters “p, ç, j and g” borrowed from Persian, different accent marks are placed on letter ‘waw’ in recent texts to highlight “v,

o-u, ö-ü” sounds and two vertical lines under letter “y” to distinguish “i-i” sound from “y”.

The Afghanistan Uzbek had been declared as the third official language of Afghanistan, along with Turkmen, Pashto and Dari (Persian spoken in Afghanistan) in the 2003 Constitution of Afghanistan. (İlik, 2012) However, the language lost this status following the change of administration in Afghanistan in August 2021.

### **The Turkmens**

They are a majority or predominantly ethnic group in some districts in the west, northwest and north of Afghanistan. The Afghanistan Turkmens generally arrived in Afghanistan after the regional conflicts between 1917 and 1924. Today, they are mostly in Anthoy, Akcha, Karqin, Hamyab, and Kizilayak districts of the Jawzjan province, and in Turgundi district of the Herat province. In addition, they live in Sheberghan in the Jawzjan province, in several districts of the Takhar, Kunduz and Herat provinces, and in and around Mazar-e Sharif in the Balkh province. (Turan, 2010) The Turkmens living in Herat generally belong to the Teke clan, and those in the Jawzjan, Faryab, Kunduz, Takhar, Baghlan and Balkh provinces belong to the Ersari clan. According to estimates, 3% of Afghanistan's population is Turkmen. The Turkmens living in Afghanistan write in Arabic alphabet similar to other Turkish tribes living in this country. (Oğuz, 2009) The Turkmens largely distanced themselves from conflicts during both the Soviet occupation and the ensuing years in civil war and have generally not been interested in political movements.

### **The Afghanistan Kyrgyz**

The Kyrgyz, who arrived in Afghanistan under the leadership of Japaarkul Khan from the Alay Valley and the Murghap River basin within the borders of today's Kyrgyzstan due to the clashes and wars in Central Asia between 1916 and 1924, settled in the highlands of the Badakhshan-Pamir region, a terrain with harsh climate. They live a semi-sedentary and nomadic life. (Pekacar, 1995)

The majority of the Kyrgyz Turks living in Pamir are from the Tayit and Kesek phratry. In the light of Rahmankul's statements, a few tents of the Kyrgyz Turks from the Nayman and the Kipchak phratry lived in this region. (Pekacar, 1995)

Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, some of the Kyrgyz first migrated to Pakistan and later to Turkey under the leadership of late Haji Rahman Qul Khan. The Turkish authorities settled them in Uluğ Pamir Village in Van province. (İlik, 2012)

The Kyrgyz government has recently been relocating the Kyrgyz, who live under tough conditions in Afghanistan, especially to the Alay and Chon Alay regions of Kyrgyzstan.

The Kyrgyz living in Afghanistan speak an original Kyrgyz dialect, far from the influence of the Soviet culture and Russian language, and use the Arabic alphabet.

### **The Afghanistan Kazakhs**

The Afghanistan Kazakhs migrated to Afghanistan at different times during the 20th century. Some arrived in Afghanistan from Kizilorda and Shymkent in today's Kazakhstan between 1916 and 1924 and during 1930s. Some moved to Afghanistan from Korgantepa

in Tajikistan, to where they had migrated earlier. The exact number of Kazakhs who migrated from Kazakhstan to Afghanistan is not known. Different sources do not clearly state the number of Kazakhs who migrated. The Kazakhs, from whom the documents were compiled, stated that 300-400 Kazakh households migrated from Kazakhstan to Korgantepa in Tajikistan, while 65 households migrated to Turkey. (Diner & Akyuz, 2016) The Afghanistan Kazakhs hail from to the 'Orta Cüz' and 'Küçük Cüz' – the Middle and Small Segment of the Kazakhs – respectively. No member of the *Ulu Cüz* (High Segment) exists among them. (Biray, 2009) After the Altai Region of the East Turkestan succumbed to the Chinese rule in the 1950s, another group of Kazakhs migrated to Afghanistan from the said region. Later, many migrated to Turkey after the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. (Rakişeva, 2007)

The Kazakhs who arrived in Afghanistan after the conflicts and wars in Central Asia settled in Qala-e Nau district in the Balkh province, and also in the Kunduz, Takhar and Badghis provinces. (Biray, 2009)

As per estimates, around 5000 Kazakhs lived in Afghanistan until the 1980s. During the turbulent years of the Soviet occupation and the civil war in Afghanistan, they migrated to countries like Pakistan, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Following the independence, Kazakhstan introduced an expansive project to bring the Kazakhs, who had been scattered worldwide, in Kazakhstan. Similarly, the Kazakhs of Afghanistan were convened and settled in Kazakhstan. In the interview we had with him in 2013, Abdul Jaleel Aghay, a leading Kazakh from Afghanistan, stated that nearly 300 Kazakhs had not migrated to Kazakhstan due to family or other reasons. (Diner & Akyuz, 2016)

In addition to the Turkic communities mentioned above, small groups of Karakalpaks, Tatars and Uyghurs live in Afghanistan. (Jarring, 1939) These Turkic groups live as minorities among other nations. For example, following the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, some Karakalpaks arrived from Turkestan and 2000 were later settled in Jalalabad during the 1950s. (Saray, 1997) However, there is no exact information about their population at the present. The Tatars living in Afghanistan Turkestan as dispersed among other Turkic nations fused into the Uzbek identity. A small group of Uighurs live in isolation in parts of northern Afghanistan, and particularly in the Badakhshan province in northeastern Afghanistan, close to the Chinese border. (Jarring, 1939).

## Conclusion

With those who forgot their native languages and those who have not, the Turkic communities constitute approximately 20% of the total population in Afghanistan. While the Turkic communities like the Galchays, the Afshars, the Hazaras, and the Aimaqs forgot their native tongues, the Uzbeks, the Turkmens, the Kyrgyz and the Kazakhs preserved theirs. The Turkic communities in Afghanistan use the Arabic alphabet.

The Uzbek language spoken in Afghanistan manifests Kipchak language features and has two dialects as "Y" and "C". The "C" dialect spoken in the Kataghan region is almost the same with the Kyrgyz language. Scientific research is due on this subject.

Some of the Turkic communities in Afghanistan are the descendants of the Ghaznavids, the Seljukids, the Harzemshahis, the Timurids, the Baburids, and the Shibanis, who previously founded states across this

geography. Some are the descendants of those who arrived from Central Asia between 1917 and 1924. In the 1980s, many migrated to Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey due to the Soviet invasion and the subsequent civil war in Afghanistan. After the independence of Kazakhstan, the Kazakhs living in Afghanistan were brought into Kazakhstan to a large extent. The Kyrgyz authorities work on resettling the Kyrgyz living in Afghanistan's Pamir-Badakhshan region to Kyrgyzstan.

There has been a recent increase in the publications on Turkish dialects and accents in Afghanistan. Having key importance in both Turkish history and literature, Afghanistan is still an uncharted field for researchers

interested in the language, literature and history of the Turkic communities. However, due to recent political developments, it has become hard and risky to conduct research through independent sources in that geography.

With the change of administration in August 2021, an anti-democratic government took over Afghanistan, dragging all people of Afghanistan, especially the communities like the Hazaras and the Aimaqs, who follow a different sect, and various Turkic communities such as the Uzbeks, with their stark differences with the Pashtuns, into a blatant state of uncertainty.

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