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## Brief Analysis

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# PROBLEMATIC REGION IN CENTRAL ASIA: THE FERGANA VALLEY

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## Abstract

The Fergana Valley, located in the center of Central Asia and shared by Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, is of great importance to all countries in the region. Although there are water resources in this valley, the water of the Syr-Darya and Amu Darya rivers, which are important rivers of the Aral Basin, is not shared equally between the countries, which causes problems between the countries of the Fergana region. The tendency of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to use water resources as leverage creates tensions in the region. In addition, extreme religious movements in the Fergana Valley worry all countries in the region. The border policy pursued by the Soviet Union poses problems to the countries of the region that they are still unable to overcome. This study examines the problems arising from the Fergana Valley, the impact of these problems, and the relations between the countries of the region and foreign powers.

**Keywords:** Fergana Valley, water sharing, border security

## Introduce

Settlement and civilization in the Fergana Valley, which lies between Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, dates back to the dawn of world history. This region is one of the most densely populated in Central Asia, with about 10 million inhabitants: geographically it covers 5% of the continent. However, 25% of the continent's population lives in [Fergana](#).

Since the region is surrounded by mountains, there is only one passage leading to the outside. This is the Khujand pass. In the valley, which extends 170 km in the north-south direction and 330 km in the east-west direction, the region of Sogd belongs to Tajikistan, the cities of Jalalabad and Osh to Kyrgyzstan, and the cities of Fergana, Andijan and Namazgah to [Uzbekistan](#).

Conflicts and struggles over the interests of states holding territories in the Fergana Valley have the potential to disrupt the stability not only of the valley but of the entire continent. When these disagreements and differences are examined, it becomes clear that the situation has developed into a significant threat. The [Osh conflict](#) between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in 1990, the march of followers of

Juma Namangana, one of the leaders of the [Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan \(IMU\)](#), a radical religious movement, to Batken in 1999, and the border conflict between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are just a few examples. In this context, the Fergana Valley plays a crucial role in terms of regional stability not only for the countries of the region but also for external powers.

Within the framework of the issues summarized above, the problems arising from the Fergana Valley, the implications of these problems, and the interest of external powers intervening in the region form the main theme of this study.

## History of Fergana Valley

The Fergana Valley has a deep-rooted history that dates back to Central Asian history. The history of the region dates back to the 5th century BC. In addition, there are many settlements dating back to the Chalcolithic period, which indicates that the settlement of the region is very old. Throughout history, the Fergana Valley has been under the influence of various empires, especially the Persian and Hellenic empires<sup>1</sup>.

Throughout its history, the region was under the rule of various governments such as the Karakhanids, Khwarazmshahs, Timur Empire, Shaybani Khanate, Bukhara Khanate, and Kokand Khanate. The Russian Tsarist Empire attacked the region from the 1860s and dominated it in the 1870s. However, the Russians were never able to fully gain control and faced a series of uprisings, the most famous of which was the [Basmachi movement](#). Moreover, before and after the Basmachi movement, there were organized and armed uprisings in the Fergana Valley. For example, a bloody uprising with a large jihadist movement took place in Andijan in 1898, and there were also uprisings in the city of Osh in 1876 and 1885, which were bloodily put down by the [Russians](#).

After Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan declared independence in 1991, the Fergana Valley was divided between these countries. In recent years, tensions in the region have remained high and have entered the international [agenda](#).

## Extreme Groups

In Central Asia, traditional values are the cornerstone of the social structure. In this context, religion, traditional relations, and nationalistic sentiments are believed to play an important role in the cohesion of societies in the region. Central Asia has a geography that is extremely suitable for the emergence and survival of sects. This is because this region has always been an area where different cultures, religions, and sects meet. The Nakşibendi, Yesevi and Kuebreviyye sects that emerged in the region are still active today. This situation shows that the region provides a suitable ground for Sufi thought<sup>2</sup>.

Cultural and religious structures have a significant impact on social and political processes in the Fergana Valley. The isolated location of the Fergana Valley has

been a haven for many political and religious figures and intellectuals and has made the valley home to conservatives and dissidents critical of the [government](#).

Some important religious movements prevalent in the Fergana Valley, reflecting the Turkic understanding of Islam:

1. **Yesevism:** Yesevism is a Sufi understanding of Islam. The founder of this doctrine is Hoca Ahmet Yesevi, who was born in Shymkent, Turkestan, which is now part of Kazakhstan. Yesevi collected his ideas in his works "Divan-i Hikmet", "Fakrname" and "Risale". These works have become the basic reference of Yesevi doctrine. Yesevism is a path of Sufism and the first Turkish sect to uphold the equality of men and women in Islam. Individuals who have contributed greatly to the spread of Yesevi teachings are people like Hakim Ata, Mansur Ata and Said Ata, who are especially respected in Central Asia and the Fergana Valley. In the Yesevi teachings, there are rituals such as the sung dhikr (zikh-i cehr), musical sema ceremonies, and the joint prayer of men and [women](#).
2. **Kubrevism:** Necmeddin Kubra is the founder of the Kubrawi Sufism sect. Necmeddin Kubra, who was killed by the Mongols in 1226, laid the foundation in Central Asia for a sect based on a simple understanding of Sufism. Kubrevism aims to help people get closer to God by contributing to their inner spiritual [development](#).
3. **Naqshbandiism:** The sect founded by Bahauddin Naqshband, who was born in Bukhara (Uzbekistan), is known as Naqshbandiyya. Among the basic principles of this sect is to reach God with divine nearness and knowledge through external (visible) and internal (hidden) purification in accordance with the religious rules. In the Naqshbandi order, it is important to follow a sheikh, not age. Moreover, in this sect, after prayer, silent chants called "hatm-i hacegan" are sung, which have Zoroastrian [influences](#).
4. **Bektashism:** The school formed under the leadership of Hacı Bektaş-ı Veli is a heterodox sect influenced by the general Shiite interpretation of Islam. Hacı Bektaş-ı Veli was a disciple of Hodja Ahmet Yesevi and was born in the city of Nishapur in Khorasan. He served as the religious leader of the Dede Garkın tribe in [Central Asia](#).
5. **Maturidi:** Muhammad Bin Mahmud Al-Maturidi is an Islamic scholar who was born in Samarkand (Uzbekistan) and lived between 852-944. Imam Maturidi is considered the founder of an important school of Islam. He is also considered an authority in such sciences as Islamic theology, sectarian history, Islamic law, and the interpretation of the Quran. Although Maturidi was opposed to Sufism, he laid the foundation for Maturidiism, the most

important sect in Central Asia, which emphasizes rationalism in religion. Imam Maturidi's most important works include "Kitabu Ta'vil'uel Kur'an," "Kitabu'l-Cedel," and "Kitabu'l-Tevhid" These works are considered important references on Islamic faith and theology and convey Maturidi's tradition of [thought](#).

6. **Lacilik:** Laçi is the Shiite branch of the Yesevi, founded in the second half of the 19th century. It has a militant structure and is a heterodox structure. It has dhikr rituals, where men and women pray together, which resemble Bektashism. The Lachi communities living in the Fergana Valley live in isolation from the majority Sunni communities, and the leaders called ishan are [important](#).

The Central Asian republics, the Muslim population, which generally adheres to the Hanafi and Shafi schools, has historically adopted a traditional understanding of Islam<sup>3</sup> that is far from radical. In particular, the madrasas in Uzbekistan and the Sufis who grew up in Turkestan are important sources of Sufi schools in the Islamic world of Central Asia. Today, however, regions such as the Fergana Valley in particular have become the field of activity of various radical elements and non-Islamic missionary organizations in the name of "[Islam](#)".

The Fergana Valley is under the influence of cultural and religious structures. These influences represent the rich history of the Fergana Valley and reflect the fusion of different cultures. Examples include Islam, the Eastern Orthodox Church, religious structures of various ethnic groups, and archeological remains associated with ancient religions. This diversity is the cornerstone of the valley's rich historical and cultural heritage. These structures are characterized by their geographic isolation and the power of their leaders. The isolated structure of the valley prompts political and religious figures to seek refuge in this [region](#).

The period between 1880 and 1890 in the Fergana Valley is characterized by the fact that the local Sufi leaders, known primarily as Ishan, offered great resistance to the Russians. These leaders encouraged the Muslims to take up arms. During the Soviet period, there were efforts to control religious life in order to keep communities in Central Asia under control. Nevertheless, religion continued to play an important role in [Central Asia](#).

The Fergana Valley was introduced to political Islam during the Soviet-Afghan war in the 1980s. During this time, the locals came under the influence of radical Islamists trained in Pakistan. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to significant changes in the region. Religion helped people strengthen their national identity. However, religious repression during the Soviet era led to a lack of knowledge about religion in society. In the post-independence period, religious education and activities spread [rapidly](#).



In the Fergana Valley, Islamist organizations such as [Hizb ut-Tahrir](#) are seen as a major threat to governments in Central Asia. Hizb ut-Tahrir seeks the restoration of the Islamic Caliphate and conducts political activities generally without the use of violence. However, radical Islamic movements are perceived as a security threat, especially by Uzbekistan and other Central Asian countries.

[The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan \(IMU\)](#) is an organization operating in Uzbekistan that has committed acts of violence aimed at overthrowing the government and establishing an Islamic state. Most notably, the assassination of Islam Karimov in 1999 revealed the existence of the IMU. The IMU has also allied with Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, and in 2015 pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in Iraq and the [Levant](#). Organizations such as the IMU and Hizb ut Tahrir could create instability in the region, but are not currently active.

The geographic remoteness of the Fergana Valley has created a haven for radical groups, which has unsettled regional governments. In particular, the Fergana Valley has become a center where Hizb ut Tahrir has increased its activities. As a result, the Fergana Valley is coming under the influence of Islamist organizations, which are considered a serious security threat by countries in the region. However, Uzbekistan has taken tough measures to combat radical Islam. The government has imposed regulations on religious matters, from madrassa training to the wearing of a beard. However, the country's young population and economic problems have led to youth discontent and an intensification of radicalism. Instead of combating only the violent manifestations of radicalism, the Uzbek government focused on efforts to understand and prevent the ideological roots of radicalism. It strictly controlled religious education, and students were taught how to fight religious extremism and [radicalism](#).

The fight against terrorism is carried out within the framework of the "Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan," the "Law on Combating Terrorism," the "Law on Combating Extremism," the "Laws on Combating Legalization of Proceeds of Crime, Financing of Terrorism and Financing of Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction," the Criminal Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan and other legal regulations. While this legislation establishes the basic principles and criminal sanctions in the fight against terrorism, it aims to prevent radical ideas in the fight against extremism and to prevent the financing of terrorism. Uzbekistan also supports counterterrorism efforts by cooperating at the national and international levels and focusing on improving the country's [security](#).

## Boundary Problems

The power struggles in Eurasia in the 18th century were mostly not ethnic in origin. These struggles were mostly between dynasties, tribes, and clans within the framework of multilingual khanates. Nations in this region defined themselves not by their roots but by their "Muslim" identities. Later, the ethnic classifications created by Soviet intellectuals were revised and language became the most

important element in this framework. The republics established in the region were created on the basis of these ethnic identities. However, the borders of the Soviet socialist republics established in the Central Asian region in the first half of the 20th century were established on the basis of language and ethnicity. Since that time, the borders have been changed frequently. Therefore, the border problems that exist in the region today date back to the [past](#).

The Fergana Valley is a problematic region between Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan and has two main problems. One of these problems is the issue of enclaves. Kyrgyzstan has four enclaves that belong to Uzbekistan, but two enclaves, Soh and Shahimardan, are particularly important. The Soh enclave hosts natural gas deposits and is also used as a military training center. This region in southern Kyrgyzstan may be a potential base for ethnic conflict because of its ethnic population density. A piece of land belonging to Kyrgyzstan is located in Uzbekistan. Conflicts between enclaves have a negative impact on nearly 80,000 people living in the [region](#).

**Table 1:** Enclaves, Population and Ethnic Composition in the Fergana Region

ENCLAVE	ENCLAVE OWNER COUNTRY	COUNTRY WHERE THE ENCLAVE IS LOCATED	POPULATION	ETHNIC STATUS
Barak	Kyrgyzstan	Uzbekistan	600	%100 Kyrgyz
Çonkara	Uzbekistan	Kyrgyzstan	0	Soil is used as land
Jangail	Uzbekistan	Kyrgyzstan	0	Soil is used as land
sarvak	Tajikistan	Uzbekistan	400-2,500	%99 uzbek, %1 Tajik
soh	Uzbekistan	Kyrgyzstan	5,000	%91 Uzbek, %9 Kyrgyz
Sahimerdan	Uzbekistan	Kyrgyzstan	25,000-70,000	%99 Tajik, %1 Kyrgyz
voruh	Tajikistan	Kyrgyzstan	10,000-30,000	%95 Tajik, %5 Kyrgyz
Kayragaç	Tajikistan	Kyrgyzstan	150	%100 Tajik

Source: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/2782395>

Among the enclaves in the Fergana Valley, the Soh and Shahimardan enclaves (Kyrgyz enclaves in Uzbekistan), Voruh (Tajik enclaves on Kyrgyz territory), and Barak (Kyrgyz enclaves on Uzbek territory) in particular are frequently affected by issues of water and land division and transportation. Tensions and conflicts arise in these regions, including over roads. These enclaves are at the center of conflicts between local peoples and states. In contrast, other enclaves such as Sarvak,

Kayragaç, Jangail and Çonkara consist of smaller settlements with less potential for conflict. The Soh enclave, in particular, has a remarkable position in terms of geographic and ethnic dynamics. This is because although the majority of the population of this enclave consists of Tajiks, the fact that Kyrgyzstan is located on Uzbek territory increases the potential for conflict in this region. Water resources, land use and transportation routes are the main reasons for the tensions between these [enclaves](#).

In 2001, a declaration defining the legal basis of the borders between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan was signed, and it was decided to annex the Soh region to Uzbekistan. However, this attempt met with opposition from the Kyrgyz population and failed due to concerns that the link between Batken and Kyrgyzstan would be cut and control over the region would become more difficult. Following these developments, the deployment of military units by Uzbekistan in the Soh region caused a new problem. The erection of electricity pylons in the Soh region in 2013 led to minor clashes between Uzbeks living there and Kyrgyz security forces, and relations between the two countries became even more strained. After this incident, both countries closed their borders to each other. The lack of clear borders, such as in the Soh region of the Fergana Valley, occasionally led to tensions between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz over the sharing of water and grazing [land](#).

The border issue between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan has been under negotiation since Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev took office in 2016 and concluded with an agreement in November 2022. While this agreement included the replacement of the Kempir-Abad (Andijan) dam on the border, it caused some concern among the Kyrgyz public and the population and led to protests. However, this agreement is expected to provide solutions to the problems of access to water and energy resources in Central Asia. Implementing the agreement and fully resolving border issues may require a process, but these developments could have a positive impact on regional stability. In addition, it is important that other organizations and central powers, such as the Organization of Turkish States, contribute to such [consensuses](#).

It can be said that the border disputes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan ended in the same way. On October 7-8, 2023, representatives of both countries met in working groups in Batken, Kyrgyzstan, to define and draw the state borders. As a result of this meeting, the parties agreed on a 43.32-kilometer border section. Kyrgyzstan's statement said that the next meeting will be held in Tajikistan to determine the remaining borders. With these developments, a large part of the 970-kilometer border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is [fixed](#).

In conclusion, it can be said that this agreement is an important step towards solving the long-standing problems in Central Asia.



## Resource Sharing Issues

The Fergana Valley is a region with problems of resource sharing among Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. These problems focus primarily on the use of resources such as arable land, natural gas, oil, coal, fresh water, and electricity. For example, while Uzbekistan provides natural gas, Kyrgyzstan provides water and electricity, and these resources are used as leverage in return. This is because most of Central Asia's water resources are located in the mountainous regions of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. However, the amount of arable land in these two countries is [limited](#).

Boundary disputes and resource sharing problems lead to conflicts, especially in regions where rivers flow through the borders, for example, in regions where water resources flow into the territory of Uzbekistan. Most people living in the Fergana Valley have difficulty accessing clean water. However, a positive development is that an agreement on resource sharing has been concluded between [Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan](#), and negotiations have begun between [Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan](#) to resolve these issues. Such agreements and negotiations are important steps toward solving the problems of resource sharing in the region.

## Conclusion

The problems in Central Asia, such as border disputes, poverty, unemployment, ethnic strife, and tensions arising from the division and use of land and water resources, are concentrated in the Fergana Valley. These problems, inherited from the Soviets, have become even more complicated after the countries of the region became independent.

The Fergana Valley is of strategic importance due to its proximity to countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, and East Turkestan. In addition, the Fergana Valley causes problems between neighboring countries due to border disputes and resource use problems. The problems in the region lead to the emergence and aggravation of local and global security problems such as terrorism, radicalism, drug trafficking and human trafficking. This has a negative impact on the economic and social development of the region.

It is believed that radical jihadist groups will gain influence in the future, especially in the Fergana Valley, the Caucasus, and South Kazakhstan, and that the organizations of jihadist groups may diversify and increase in number. For this reason, regional states should develop common definitions, legal systems, and cooperation mechanisms in the fight against crime and terrorism.

Since the Fergana Valley is a region sensitive to internal and external provocations, it may be exposed to potential risks. Measures such as declaring the Fergana Valley a free trade zone should be taken to facilitate travel for the people of the region. In addition, reaching an agreement on border issues between the states in the region and starting negotiations to solve these problems constitute an important step



towards solving the problems. The leadership role of the [Organization of Turkic States](#) can help in the final solution of the problems in the Fergana Valley.

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<sup>1</sup> Sinor, D. (Ed.). (1990). *The Cambridge history of early inner Asia*(Vol. 1). Cambridge University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Sufism, also known as Tasawwuf, is a mystical and spiritual dimension of Islam. It is a contemplative and introspective form of Islamic practice that focuses on the inner, spiritual journey of the individual to seek a closer and more direct connection with God (Allah). Sufism emphasizes the importance of the heart and the purification of the soul.

<sup>3</sup> The traditional understanding of Islam is a form of interpretation and practice that is strictly based on the fundamental beliefs and teachings of Islam and often has its origins in the early periods of Islam.