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SETTLEMENT OF TURKMENS IN THE KASHKADARYA OASIS, THEIR TRIBAL AND CLAN COMPOSITION, AND DEMOGRAPHIC DYNAMICS

(A case study of Mirishkor, Kasbi, Koson and Muborak districts)

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Annotation. The article examines the settlement of Turkmens in the Kashkadarya oasis, focusing on the Mirishkor, Kasbi, Koson and Muborak districts of the Karshi steppe, their tribal and clan composition, and their demographic dynamics in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Drawing on historical-ethnographic literature, the 1926 regionalization materials, independence-period statistics and the preliminary results of the 2026 census, the study shows that local Turkmens are linked mainly with the Ersari tribe of the Middle Amu Darya and identifies the stages and drivers of their migration. Between 1999 and 2014 the number of Turkmens in the region rose from 26.8 to 32.6 thousand, while their share fell from 1.24 to 1.13 percent. Differences in district growth rates and population density are interpreted in relation to the territorial distribution of ethnic groups.

Keywords: Kashkadarya oasis, Karshi steppe, Turkmens, Ersari, tribal composition, migration, ethnodemography, Mirishkor, Kasbi, Koson, Muborak, Pomuq.

INTRODUCTION

Uzbekistan is a multinational state, and studying the historical formation, settlement patterns and demographic development of ethnic groups is an important avenue for providing a scholarly basis for policies promoting interethnic harmony. The population and agricultural census conducted from 15 January to 28 February 2026—the first of its kind since Uzbekistan gained independence—provides a new empirical basis for this issue. According to the preliminary results, the country's population stood at 39,047,321 as of 15 January 2026 [1], while the Turkmen population was reported to be 194,700 [2]. Turkmens live in relatively compact communities, including in Kashkadarya Region, which borders Turkmenistan. The Karshi steppe in the western part of the region has historically maintained close economic and ethnic ties with the population of the Middle Amu Darya.

At the same time, the Turkmens of Kashkadarya have received little attention as a distinct research subject. Existing studies either mention them briefly within the region's overall ethnic composition or discuss them alongside Turkmen communities in the Zarafshan and Surkhan oases. This article aims to identify the stages of Turkmen settlement in the oasis, reconstruct their tribal and clan composition from historical sources, and analyse

demographic changes from the late twentieth to the early twenty-first century, using Mirishkor, Kasbi, Koson and Muborak districts as examples.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The principal scholarly contribution to the ethnic history of southern Uzbekistan is the work of B. Kh. Karmysheva. Her 1976 monograph documents the spread of the Middle Amu Darya Turkmens upstream as far as the Vakhsh valley [3, pp. 117–118, 256–257]. In a 1980 article, she emphasised that some Turkmens living along the Amu Darya had long been moving into the lower Kashkadarya and Zarafshan valleys, settling among Uzbeks, Tajiks and Arabs while maintaining contact with members of their tribes and preserving their ethnic identity [4]. Karmysheva's 2001 article uses the right bank of the Amu Darya to examine the mechanisms through which Ersari clans migrated to new territories [5].

The internal structure and territorial distribution of Turkmen tribes are systematised in Ya. R. Vinnikov's comprehensive ethnographic survey of Charjow Region [6], G. P. Vasilyeva's work on the ethnogenesis of the Turkmen people [7], and S. Ataniyazov's dictionary of Turkmen ethnonyms [8]. V. G. Moshkova discussed elements shared by the tribal and clan structures of Uzbeks, Karakalpaks and Turkmens [9], while S. G. Agadzhanov addressed the role of Oghuz–Turkmen tribes in the region during the Middle Ages [10]. The principal source of quantitative data for the early twentieth century is Materials on the Regionalisation of Central Asia [11].

During the independence period, F. Sh. Salayev used statistical data to examine the demographic situation and ethnic composition of the Kashkadarya oasis population in the 1950s–1980s and after independence [12; 13]. However, these works treat Turkmens as part of the overall ethnic composition and do not address district-level patterns or tribal and clan affiliations. This gap constitutes the scholarly rationale for the present study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is based on the principles of historicism, objectivity and systematic analysis. The historical-comparative method was used to compare sources from different periods, and retrospective analysis was applied to reconstruct successive stages of migration. The demographic component calculates absolute and relative growth, average annual growth rates, population shares and density. Sources include ethnographic studies, the 1926 regionalisation materials, the National Statistics Committee's SIAT database [14], results of the 1989 population census [15], press releases issued by the regional statistics office [16], and preliminary results of the 2026 census. District population figures for 2015 and 2020 are based on statistical estimates [17], while the 2026 figures refer to 1 July and are taken from SIAT.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

1. Stages of settlement.

The sources suggest that the settlement of Turkmens in the oasis occurred in waves over several centuries. Four stages may be distinguished for analytical purposes.

The first stage—the medieval layer. From the mid-twelfth century, Turkmens began to settle areas adjoining the upper course of the Amu Darya [10; 5, p. 114]. Following Shaybani Khan's campaigns, however, the broad territory extending from Termez to Karshi became a homeland of the Uzbek Kungrat tribe. Some Turkmens consequently left the area, while others were gradually assimilated into the Uzbek milieu [5, pp. 114–115].

The second stage—the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Following the migration of the Ersari tribe from Mangyshlak to the Middle Amu Darya between the late seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth century [18], a diversified economic system combining irrigated agriculture with livestock raising in the steppe developed there. According to B. Kh. Karmysheva, the Amu Darya washed away hundreds of hectares of cultivated land each year, while the difficulty of digging new canals and securing water, together with adverse social conditions, compelled Turkmens to seek new lands. Some settled in the lower reaches of the Kashkadarya and Zarafshan rivers [4]. Regionalisation data from 1924 also record a Turkmen population in the lower Kashkadarya area [11, pp. 272–273]. The fact that Arabs in the same area combined Karakul sheep breeding with irrigated farming and spoke two or three languages [4] indicates that the region had long been a multiethnic environment.

The third stage—the 1920s and 1930s. The abolition of the Emirate of Bukhara, the national-territorial delimitation of 1924, land and water reforms, and collectivisation prompted large-scale population movements across the region. The Middle Amu Darya and Karshi steppe, previously part of a common economic space, were incorporated into different republics. This restricted the Turkmen communities' contacts with fellow tribespeople and accelerated their integration into local society.

The fourth stage—the 1960s–1980s. Irrigation and development of the Karshi steppe, the establishment of new state farms and settlements, and the emergence of an industrial centre based on the Muborak gas fields fundamentally changed the oasis's ethnodemographic landscape and caused rapid growth in the region's population, especially in towns [12]. New administrative units were established: Kasbi District was formed on 16 October 1970 [19], Muborak gained town status in 1974, Muborak District was created in 1978, and Bahoriston District—with its centre in the village of Pomuq—was formed in 1979 (Pomuq is now an urban-type settlement in Mirishkor District). During the same period, Crimean Tatars were also resettled in the Pomuq steppe and the environs of Muborak, giving rise to new multiethnic settlements around traditional Turkmen villages.

2. Tribal and clan composition.

Given that the Ersari were the largest tribe among the Turkmens of the Middle Amu Darya in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries [6], there are grounds to regard them as the principal component of the Turkmen population that migrated to the lower Kashkadarya. The Ersari tribe consisted of four major divisions—Qora (Gara), Bekovul, Gunesh and Ulugdepe [18]. G. P. Vasilyeva identified components of different origins within the Ersari, including Qarqin, Eymir, Chovdur and Qalmiqli [7]. This points to the tribe's complex and multilayered internal composition.

During migration, Turkmen communities retained their clan organisation. For example, Ersari groups that moved to the right bank of the Amu Darya from the mid-nineteenth century settled compactly by clan: Gunesh in the villages of Xoshman, Chakish and Orol; Bekovul in Oqtepa; and Ulugdepe in Shurob, Maymuntuqay, Qoraqamar and Boldir [5, p. 116]. According to the 1926 materials, of 3,825 Turkmens recorded between Termez and Kelif, 1,190 belonged to the Sariq tribe, 1,015 to the Ersari, and 1,620 to the “ishxov” (shix) lineage group [5, p. 116]. These comparative figures may serve as reference points for clarifying the clan composition of Kashkadarya Turkmens through fieldwork.

An important methodological distinction is necessary here. In the oasis, the ethnonym “Turkmen” has two meanings: ethnic Turkmens who speak an Oghuz language and retain a Turkmen identity; and groups called “Turkmen” within the Uzbek tribal and clan system, such as the “turkman-juz” branch of the Yuz tribe and the Nurota Turkmens, who speak a Kipchak dialect and identify as Uzbeks [9; 3]. Only the former are classified as Turkmens in statistical records.

Table 1. Tribal and clan composition of Turkmens in Kashkadarya and adjacent territories (based on sources)

Group	Divisions and constitue groups	Source
Ersari (principal core)	Qora (Gara), Bekovu Gunesh, Ulugdep components Qarqin, Eym Chovdur, Qalmiqli	[18]; [7]; [5]
Sariq, Salor (smaller groups	Recorded along the Midd Amu Darya and Surkha 1,190 Sariq between Term and Kelif in 1926	[5]; [6]
Sacred lineages (avlod)	xoja, sayyid, shix (ishxov maxdum, ota	[5]; [8]
“Turkmen” groups amor Uzbeks	“turkman-juz” branch of t Yuz tribe; Nurota Turkme (Uzbek ethnic identity)	[9]; [3]

Note: compiled by the author from the literature.

3. Demographic dynamics.

At the national level, the 1989 census recorded 121,600 Turkmens (approximately 0.6% of the population) [15], while the preliminary results of the 2026 census put their number at 194,700 [2]. Thus, their number increased by 60% over 37 years, whereas the country's overall population almost doubled [1]. Their share of the total consequently fell to approximately 0.5%. A similar trend is observed in Kashkadarya Region (Table 2).

Table 2. Changes in the number of Turkmens in Kashkadarya Region (1999–2014)

Year	Regional population, thousand	Turkmens, thousand	Share, %	1999 = 100
1999	2166.3	26.8	1.24	100.0
2000	2212.7	27.4	1.24	102.2
2004	2378.2	29.0	1.22	108.2
2006	2462.2	30.0	1.22	111.9
2011	2777.8	32.1	1.16	119.8
2014	2895.3	32.6	1.13	121.6

Source: author's calculations based on [13] (shares and indices calculated by the author).

As Table 2 shows, the number of Turkmens in the region increased by 5,800 (21.6%) between 1999 and 2014, but their average annual growth rate (1.31%) was lower than that of the regional population as a whole (1.95%). Their population share therefore declined from 1.24% to 1.13%. Three factors may help explain this: return and labour migration in the early years of independence; changes in self-identification associated with interethnic marriages and integration (B. Kh. Karmysheva noted the “assimilating” role of Uzbeks in steppe areas [4]); and the relatively high natural increase of the regional population, with 99,600 births and 15,600 deaths recorded in 2025 [16].

4. Characteristics of the study districts.

The four selected districts differ substantially in their physical geography, population density and ethnic composition (Table 3).

Table 3. Demographic indicators of the study districts

District	Area, km²	Population 01.01.2015, thousand	Population 01.01.2020, thousand	Population 01.07.2026, thousand	Growth 2015–2026, %	Density, persons/km²
Mirishkor	3210	108.6	119.2	135.9	25.1	42
Kasbi	650	177.2	195.9	223.9	26.4	344
Koson	1880	255.5	284.5	329.6	29.0	175
Muborak	3070	78.9	86.6	97.7	23.8	32
Region tot	28568	2958.9	3280.4	3745.6	26.6	131

Source: author's calculations based on [17], [14] and [20]. Growth and density calculated by the author.

Mirishkor District lies on the border with Turkmenistan and contains Pomuq, the largest compact Turkmen settlement in the oasis. According to 2018 data, of the district's more than 113,000 residents, over 16,000 lived in predominantly Turkmen Pomuq and over 20,000 in predominantly Arab Jeynov [21]. Pomuq alone therefore accounted for roughly 14% of the district's population. The district's low population density (42 persons/km²) is associated with an economy based on steppe livestock raising and newly irrigated land.

Muborak District emerged in the 1970s around the gas industry and is a multiethnic area populated largely by in-migrants. It has the lowest density (32 persons/km²) and the slowest growth (23.8%). In contrast, Kasbi is an intensively irrigated oasis district with a density 2.6 times the regional average (344 persons/km²). In the early 2000s, Uzbeks made up 86.1% of its population, with Tajiks, Turkmens, Kyrgyz, Koreans, Tatars and other groups accounting for the remainder [19]. Koson District was established on 29 September 1926 and covers 1,880 km² [20]. It leads the region in population size and growth rate (29.0%). Koson lies in the lower Kashkadarya area, where the historical presence of Turkmens is documented.

A clear territorial pattern thus emerges: in the steppe border district of Mirishkor, Turkmens live in relatively homogeneous, compact villages; in industrial Muborak, they form part of a multiethnic environment; while in the densely settled oasis districts of Kasbi and Koson, they live in dispersed communities alongside Uzbeks and Arabs. These differences also influence the degree to which ethnic identity is preserved.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

First, the settlement of Turkmens in the Kashkadarya oasis was a multistage process extending from the Middle Ages to the late twentieth century. Its principal layer is associated with Turkmens who moved from the Middle Amu Darya to the lower Kashkadarya in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for environmental reasons (changes in the river channel) and socioeconomic reasons. Development of the Karshi steppe in the 1960s–1980s fundamentally changed the ethnic landscape.

Second, there are grounds to conclude that the Ersari tribe played a leading role in the tribal and clan composition of the oasis Turkmens. At the same time, ethnic Turkmens must be clearly distinguished from groups bearing the name “Turkmen” within the Uzbek tribal and clan system.

Third, although the absolute number of Turkmens has been growing steadily, their share of the regional and national populations has been declining. Geographically, they live in compact communities in Mirishkor (Pomuq), in dispersed communities in Kasbi and Koson, and as part of a multiethnic environment in Muborak.

The following steps are recommended: once the final results of the 2026 census (expected to be prepared by 1 July 2027 [14]) are published, analyse ethnicity and mother-tongue data at district and mahalla (neighbourhood) levels; carry out ethnographic field research on genealogies, clan emblems, dialects and carpet weaving in Pomuq and other Turkmen villages; and conduct comparative research on the ethnic history of border areas in cooperation with scholars from Turkmenistan.

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