


The Socio-Cultural Adaptation of The Afghan Uzbek Diaspora In Turkey: The Case of Ovakent, Hatay

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Abstract: This scholarly article presents a comprehensive study of the socio-cultural adaptation processes of the Uzbek diaspora, which was forced to migrate from Afghanistan to Turkey. The central focus of the research is on the cultural preservation and social integration strategies of Afghan Uzbeks who settled in the village of Ovakent, Hatay Province, in 1982. The main research directions cover: the impact of the 1989 Afghan crisis on migration; mechanisms for receiving ethnic migrants; the history of formation and demographic characteristics; the role of language, customs, and family structures in ethnic identification; and the dynamics of relations with the local community. The scientific novelty of this study lies in its micro-sociological analysis of the adaptation process of Ovakent's Uzbek community, which is presented for the first time. It identifies the factors that contribute to maintaining the cultural stability of ethnic groups under conditions of forced migration. The article provides essential empirical data for understanding adaptation strategies of ethnic communities within global migration processes.

Keywords: Afghan Uzbeks, diaspora, migration, socio-cultural adaptation, religious life, Turkey, Hatay, Ovakent.

Introduction: Migration is an inseparable part of human history and represents a complex sociological phenomenon that leads to social, cultural, economic, and religious transformations. Various causes, such as climate change, geographical factors, political conflicts, economic inequality, and religious persecution, have compelled people to leave their homelands. The intensification of global migration flows has further increased the significance of this phenomenon. Forced migration, in particular, emerges as a result of human rights violations, military conflicts, and natural disasters, creating the need for many individuals to seek new living environments. The Republic of Turkey, due to its geographical location, democratic structure, and relatively stable economy in the region, has become an important destination for migrants from various countries. The Anatolian land, which has hosted many civilizations throughout history, has shown a unique sensitivity in accepting communities that share ethnic and religious similarities. The Turkish nation's nomadic past and historical experience tied to steppe

culture have also fostered a sense of empathy and assistance toward migrants. The Soviet Union's military intervention in Afghanistan (1979–1989) brought profound political and social changes to the region. The invasion by the Red Army and the subsequent civil war forced many people from northern Afghanistan—including ethnic Uzbeks—to leave their homeland. Millions of Afghan refugees fled to neighboring countries, including Pakistan. In 1982, the Republic of Turkey received 4,195 Afghan migrants of Turkic origin from Pakistan, including ethnic Uzbeks, and resettled them in various regions across the country. This study aims to examine the formation, socio-cultural adaptation processes, and current state of the Afghan Uzbek diaspora that was relocated to Turkey in 1982 and settled in the village of Ovakent in Hatay Province. Within the framework of the study, the historical causes of migration, the adaptation of migrants to a new environment, their tendencies to preserve ethnic and cultural identity, and their interactions with the local community are analyzed. The results of this

research are of significant academic value for understanding the consequences of forced migration and studying the integration processes of migrant communities.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative methodology to examine the sociocultural and religious life of the Uzbek diaspora that migrated from Afghanistan to Turkey. Taking into account existing limitations, the research applies the following primary methods: Relevant academic literature, archival documents, demographic data, and mass media sources are analyzed to construct the theoretical foundation and contextual framework of the study. To identify the modes of interaction and self-representation within the diaspora, textual and visual materials (websites, forums, social media, documentary content) are examined. To determine the specific features of the Afghan Uzbek diaspora, the experiences of other migrant communities in Turkey and the Uzbek diasporas abroad are analyzed. Statistical data and survey results are analyzed to assess the demographic and socio-economic condition of the diaspora community.

Literature Review

Existing research on the sociocultural adaptation of the Afghan Uzbek diaspora in Turkey mainly focuses on the following areas: Öztürk (2014) examined the historical dynamics of Turkic ethnic group migration from Afghanistan to Turkey, analyzing the migration waves of 1979–1989. His dissertation (2014) also addressed the settlement patterns and labor market integration of migrants. Kalafat (1995) explored the cultural consequences of migration and strategies for preserving ethnic identification. Andican (2020) analyzed the macro-political causes of migration and the transnational connections of the diaspora. However, certain microsociological aspects, such as the sociocultural and religious dynamics of Uzbek migrants in Ovakent village of Hatay province, their mechanisms for preserving ethnic identity, and interactions with the local community, have not been adequately explored through empirical research. This study seeks to address this gap in the existing scholarship.

DISCUSSION AND RESULT

The research conducted on the Afghan Uzbek diaspora living in the village of Ovakent in Hatay Province, Turkey, revealed the following key aspects of the cultural preservation and integration processes of migrant communities: The community simultaneously maintains its ethnic identity (language, traditions, family structures) while adapting to the local society. The increasing use of the Turkish language among

younger generations and changes in attitudes toward certain traditions indicate a process of cultural transformation. Sunni Islam serves as the main unifying factor for the community. The informal religious education system and communal rituals not only reinforce ethnic solidarity but also facilitate the intergenerational transmission of cultural heritage. Changes in the cultural codes observed among the younger generation reflect the dynamic nature typical of diasporic communities, which has significant implications for future cultural preservation strategies.

Main body

For a nation like the Turks, historically rooted in nomadic and steppe cultures the concept of migration holds profound significance. The Turkish people of Anatolia and the Republic of Turkey, aware of this sensitivity, have embraced numerous migrant communities who left their homelands for various reasons. Among these migrants, those sharing common ancestry and religious beliefs were given priority. The majority of the migrants accepted by Turkey were of Muslim and Turkic origin. Notably, beginning in the 1950s, Uzbeks fleeing the Soviet Union after World War II arrived in Turkey via Pakistan. In addition, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Uyghurs from China's Xinjiang region and Afghan Uzbeks brought to Turkey in 1982 also belong to this group. The migrants were settled in different villages and cities according to their ethnic identities. This study focuses on the socio-cultural and religious lives of the Uzbek migrants, originally from Afghanistan, who were brought from Pakistan and settled in Ovakent village, Hatay Province, in 1982. Apart from the introduction, the research is divided into three sections. The introduction outlines the general theoretical framework. The first section presents an overview of Hatay Province and Ovakent village. The second section explores the socio-cultural life in Ovakent based on research findings, while the third section examines the village's religious life. The study concludes with evaluations and appendices. Migration is one of the key factors causing changes in the socio-economic, cultural, religious attitudes, and behaviors in both the origin and destination regions. The geographical area within the present borders of the Republic of Turkey has historically experienced numerous waves of migration. Some of the newcomers integrated into Turkish society by establishing various relationships with the Turks, the principal element of the state, while others preserved their identities and continued their existence as a subculture. Turkic migrants who arrived in Turkey from different countries at different times have recently attracted the attention of sociologists. Although not extensively studied, these groups have become subjects of

academic research, particularly within sociology and the sociology of religion. For example, there have been scholarly works on Uyghur migrants from East Turkestan who arrived after World War II [1, pp. 45–52]. A major phase in the migration of Afghan Uzbeks to Turkey was triggered by the Soviet occupation of the region. The Soviet army's invasion of Afghanistan and the subsequent events significantly impacted both Afghanistan and the Turkic world. On April 27–28, 1978, a military coup was staged by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan against President Mohammad Daoud Khan (Andican, 2020, p. 507). As a result of this coup, Daoud Khan was killed, and the Afghan government was overthrown.

The leader of the "Saur Revolution," Nur Mohammad Taraki, was appointed head of the newly established Democratic Republic of Afghanistan [2, pp. 15, 45–48]. Following a revolt by opposition groups, Afghanistan plunged into a civil war, prompting Taraki to request Soviet intervention. The Soviet Union intervened militarily in late 1979 [3, pp. 115, 78–85]. Under Brezhnev's leadership, the USSR aimed to expand its influence by supporting the Marxist-Leninist government in Afghanistan, securing access to Middle Eastern oil and the Indian Ocean, and suppressing Islamic movements in the region [4, pp. 45–48]. The Soviet invasion in 1978 intensified the political crisis and armed conflict in Afghanistan, leading to forced displacement, especially in the northern regions heavily populated by Uzbeks such as Baghlan, Kunduz, Faryab, Helmand, Takhar, and Mazar-i-Sharif. This occupation created a complex and multi-faceted refugee crisis in the region. Civilians' lives were endangered, vital services collapsed, and economic activity halted. As a result, people were forced to flee for survival and a more secure future. Around four million refugees migrated to Pakistan during this period. However, ethnic and religious divisions escalated tensions and increased refugee flows. In this context, Turkey supported international initiatives to ensure the safe return of Afghan refugees [5, p. 69]. Yet it was Turkish President Kenan Evren's visit to refugee camps in Peshawar, Pakistan, and his meeting with former Afghan MP Abdulkarim Mahdum that shaped the destiny of Turkic-origin refugees [6, p. 509], leading to the inclusion of Turkic refugees on Turkey's resettlement agenda. Following Evren's visit on November 22, 1981, Turkey initiated the resettlement of Turkic refugees by enacting Law No. 2641 to facilitate their transfer from Pakistan. During the occupation, some Uzbeks traveled westward using unofficial routes to reach Pakistan and were granted refugee status. In 1982, based on a decision by the Turkish Council of Ministers and under the

coordination of UNHCR, 4,195 Afghan refugees of Turkic origin, including Uzbeks, were brought to Turkey and settled in provinces such as Şanlıurfa and Hatay [7, p. 81]. These Afghan Uzbeks represent part of the millions of refugees displaced by the war in Afghanistan. Their acceptance and resettlement in Turkey reflect the country's humanitarian principles and its policies based on historical and cultural ties with the Uzbeks. The displacement of Uzbek migrants began with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Some Turkic-origin migrants from northern Afghanistan—Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, and Turkmens—headed to Iran or Pakistan. The harsh conditions they encountered led many to seek refuge in Saudi Arabia or Turkey [8, p. 32]. Over the years, Uzbek groups primarily from Baghlan, Kunduz, and Mazar-i-Sharif were transferred to Turkey through agreements and organizations, and were settled in various regions based on their socio-economic conditions and skills. For example, Kyrgyz engaged in livestock were sent to Erciş (Van), Turkmens to Musa village (Tokat), and Uzbeks to Ovakent (Hatay), Gaziantep, and Urfa-Ceylanpınar. Due to landslide risks in the Kömürçükuru neighborhood of the Elmadag region, part of the Amanos Mountains between Hatay and Iskenderun, a plan was made to relocate the residents. As part of this, 442 model houses were built on the Amik Plain, at the foot of the Amanos Mountains. In 1982, 172 Uzbek families (789 individuals) from Afghanistan were settled in Ovakent with the support of the Council of Ministers and the United Nations [9, p. 12]. Over time, an additional 150 families moved from Kömürçükuru. Today, the number of Uzbek households has exceeded one thousand due to extensions and new buildings adjacent to the original houses. Though it held village status for a time, Ovakent was later reclassified as a neighborhood when Hatay became a metropolitan municipality.

With legal and illegal migration from Afghanistan and population growth, the number of residents in the neighborhood exceeded 7,000. However, due to the migration of youth seeking better employment in major cities like Istanbul and İzmir, TÜİK reports that the population has dropped to around 6,900. The Uzbek migrants who settled in the neighborhood over time came from various tribes in Afghanistan [10, p. 44], generally divided into three major groups: Parakandalar – 9 smaller clans, Qongirotlar – 7 clans, Tavchi (Toqchi)lar – 7 clans. The Qongirot and Tavchi (Toqchi) groups, who are the most influential in the community and originally from the Fergana Valley, claim descent from the Prophet and are especially respected due to their strong religious commitment. Despite coming from different tribes and regions, there are no major linguistic or cultural differences among

them aside from minor pronunciation distinctions [11, p. 44b].

CONCLUSION

Migration is a key factor that brings about changes in the socio-economic, cultural, and religious patterns and behaviors of both origin and destination regions. The territory within the present-day Republic of Turkey has experienced many such migrations throughout history. Some migrants have integrated into Turkish society, forming various relations with Turks, while others have maintained their distinct identities, existing as subcultures. The Afghan Uzbeks who migrated to Turkey are part of the millions displaced by war in Afghanistan. Their acceptance and settlement highlight Turkey's humanitarian values and culturally rooted policies toward the Uzbek people. The findings of this study indicate that Afghan Uzbeks settled in Ovakent, Hatay, have formed a distinctive socio-cultural and religious life in the post-migration period.

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