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From the Splendor and Glory of Persian to Its Decline and Marginalization in Uzbekistan

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ABSTRACT

With its deep historical roots and civilizational significance, the Persian language (historically and regionally known as Farsi, Dari, and Tajik) served for centuries as the official and cultural lingua franca across extensive regions of the pre-modern world. Among these regions, Transoxiana—particularly the cities of Bukhara and Samarkand (also spelt Samarqand or Samarghand)—occupied a distinguished place in the historical and geographical development of Persian. For nearly two millennia, these cities not only formed an integral part of the Persianate world but also frequently functioned as its key cultural and literary centers. This study focuses on Persian-speaking cities of modern day Uzbekistan and examines the factors that contributed to both the flourishing and the decline of Persian as a language in this region. As the mother cities of Transoxiana, Bukhara and Samarkand played a crucial role in safeguarding Persian over the past thousand years, resisting four major waves of invasion: Arab, Mongol, Turkic, and Russian. The central question of this article is: How did the Persian language in Uzbekistan descend from a peak of splendor to a state of profound decline? The study also evaluates the current status of Persian in comparison with other regional languages and reviews efforts aimed at its revival. Using library sources and a historical-analytical method, and drawing on the theoretical frameworks of identity constructivism and cultural hegemony, this research explores the transformation of Persian's status in Uzbekistan from the Samanid era to the present. The study concludes that the historical cycles of suppression and revival of the Persian language demonstrate its enduring role not merely as a medium of communication but as a core repository of cultural memory and identity among Iranian-descended communities, highlighting its resilience as a civilizational force and the importance of equitable linguistic and cultural policies for sustaining shared heritage and regional coexistence.

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Introduction

Central Asia—known in antiquity as Turan and, after the spread of Islam, as Māwarāʾ al-Nahr or Transoxiana—refers to the vast lands surrounding the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers.

The population of Central Asia consists of diverse ethnic groups; however, historical evidence indicates the indigenous presence of Tajiks—Persian-speaking, Sunni, Iranian peoples. Tajiks have been the primary guardians of the Persian language in at least four major historical periods: the Arab conquests, the Mongol invasions, the Turkic expansions, and the Russian imperial advance. They continue to carry this heavy cultural and identity-bearing responsibility.

Following Uzbekistan's independence in 1991 and the state's emphasis on Uzbek as the official language, Persian language experienced significant marginalization and retreat. Despite these challenges, Persian remains a major component of the cultural and social identity of Tajiks in Uzbekistan. Large communities of Persian speakers maintain a strong attachment to the language's rich literary and historical heritage, viewing it as an inseparable part of their identity. This attachment reinforces a shared cultural and historical consciousness across the region.

At the same time, Persian faces serious challenges. state language policies prioritizing Uzbek have reduced its public use, while the presence of a sizable Persian-speaking population and widespread interest in Persian literature offer opportunities for preservation and revitalization.

The role of the Uzbek government in safeguarding and strengthening Persian requires careful consideration of the social, cultural, and political factors shaping the language's status. The decline of Persian in Uzbekistan signifies not only a reduction in the number of speakers but also the erosion of a profound cultural and literary heritage. Persian embodies thousands of stories, poems, and intellectual traditions that form part of the region's historical identity. Thus, the decline of Persian in Uzbekistan can be interpreted as a decline in the cultural and historical identity of Greater Iran.This article examines the nature and causes of the rise and decline of Persian—the indigenous language of Tajiks in Uzbekistan—across major cities such as Bukhara, Samarkand, Surxondaryo, and Namangan, from the Samanid period (819 CE) to the present (2026).

The central research question

This study addresses the central research question: How did the Persian language in Uzbekistan transition from a period of historical prominence to its contemporary state of profound decline? It is argued that this decline is attributable to a confluence of factors, primarily encompassing significant political transformations, extensive geographical and social restructuring within Transoxiana, and the increasing influence of other languages, particularly Russian and Uzbek.

Theoretical Framework: Integrating Identity Constructivism and Cultural Hegemony

From a constructivist perspective, ethnic and linguistic identities are not fixed or primordial phenomena; rather, they are produced and reproduced within the interactions of political

forces, elites, state structures, and dominant historical discourses. In this framework, language is not merely a communicative tool but one of the central elements shaping collective identity and social groups. From this viewpoint, a shift in the status of a language within the social order reflects a transformation in the balance of power among groups.

The historical prestige of Persian in Transoxiana during the Samanid era emerged from institutional structures that regarded the language as a bearer of cultural, scholarly, and administrative capital, placing it at the core of regional identity. This situation persisted roughly until the establishment of the Soviet system. With the arrival of the Soviets, however, a systematic and structured project of redefining ethnic identities began—one in which "Russian" and "Uzbek" identities were formulated as the official and legitimate identities. This redefinition detached Persian from its long-standing position and relegated it to the level of an "informal" and "non-national" identity.

In the next stage, this identity reconfiguration was consolidated through mechanisms of cultural hegemony, in the sense articulated by Antonio Gramsci. According to Gramsci, domination becomes stable when the values, historical narratives, and language of the dominant group are rendered so natural and self-evident that other groups accept them without conscious resistance. In Uzbekistan, this hegemony was exercised through a monolingual educational system, state-controlled media, restrictive language policies, Turkic-centered historical representations, and the removal of Persian symbols from public spaces. These mechanisms not only excluded Persian from official domains but also weakened its cultural legitimacy and reorganized collective memory in ways that diminished or erased the role of Persian in the region's civilization.

Thus, the decline of Persian is arguably not the result of a natural decrease in speakers but the outcome of a semantic order in which Uzbek was institutionalized as the "national language" and Persian was marginalized. This theoretical framework demonstrates that explaining the decline of Persian in Uzbekistan is only possible when examined in connection with two additional levels: first, the process of national identity reconstruction, in which states engineer new identities through linguistic and historical policies; and second, the mechanisms of cultural hegemony that institutionalize this new identity through educational, cultural, and ideological tools. Accordingly, the status of Persian in Uzbekistan is not merely a linguistic issue but a deeply political, ethnic, and identity-based one—an arena in which language becomes a field of power competition. This framework facilitates an analysis of the historical prestige of Persian in the context of past political power and its subsequent decline, within the broader processes of new identity engineering and cultural domination, illustrating how language, history, and identity have been reshaped in the nation-building process of Uzbekistan.

Research Background

From the era of the Samanid dynasty (9^{th} –11^{th} centuries CE), Persian served as the principal language of education, administration, and state institutions throughout Central Asia and Greater Khorasan (Inamov, 1998). Educational institutions in Transoxiana were generally divided into two categories. The first category consisted of elementary and secondary schools, commonly referred to as *maktab*. These schools were typically established in mosques, in the

homes of teachers, or in large villages, and between 5,000 and 10,000 such *maktabs* operated across Transoxiana, educating the younger generation. The second category comprised institutions known as madrasas, which functioned as centers of higher learning. They were usually founded in major cities such as Bukhara, Samarkand, Tashkent, Khiva, Kokand, and Surkhandarya, as well as in densely populated rural areas. Students in the *maktabs* of Transoxiana were generally divided into two groups: the takhta-khān and the kitāb-khān. The takhta-khān group consisted of three levels: first-level students learned the letters of the alphabet; second-level students formed syllables using letters and diacritics; and third-level students combined syllables to form words. Students in the kitāb-khān group first learned to read the Haftiyak and then proceeded to read the Qur'an. Their level of study was identified by the terms Haftiyak-khān and Qur'ān-khān. (Inamov, 1998). The third textbook used in Transoxiana's maktabs was the well-known Chahār Kitāb, written in Persian. This text explained the pillars of Islam and the principles of Islamic law. Its author, Sharaf al-Dīn, was a Tajik scholar from Bukhara who had studied in Khorasan.

This book Chahar kitab was written and completed in the years 1118–1119 CE and was taught as a mandatory text in maktabs throughout Transoxiana. From the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries onward, with the expanding rule of Turkic dynasties and the increasing importance of the Turkic language in the political and social life of Transoxiana, Persian books gradually fell out of use and were replaced by Turkic texts. Nevertheless, until the nineteenth century, the dominance of the Persian language in Central Asia remained undeniable. With the arrival of the Russians in Central Asia, the linguistic balance shifted in favor of Uzbek and Russian, a situation that has largely persisted to this day (Inamov, 1998).

The Samanid era was one of the most important and influential periods in the history of the Islamic centuries in Transoxiana. This period has been described by some scholars as the "Renaissance of the Persian language" following the Arab conquest (Meysami, 2012: 30). During this era, numerous historical texts and sources were written, covering various cultural and civilizational dimensions. Some of these works provide selected accounts of the history and events of the Samanid state, while others encompass the entire Samanid period.

It should not be overlooked that, in addition to the significant role of Samanid rulers and viziers, other factors—such as Persian cultural traditions and the presence of religious and doctrinal ideas—had a profound impact on the historiography of the Samanid era. The selection of Bukhara as the capital accelerated this cultural movement and, by drawing upon ancient Iranian and Islamic beliefs and intellectual traditions, contributed significantly to its development (Sepehri, 2010: 95).

During the Samanid period, there was a deliberate and systematic efforts to write, strengthen, and expand the Persian language and culture in response to scientific and administrative needs. In the literary sphere, poets were encouraged, and translations and the creation of poetic works—especially national epics—were commissioned. Oral and rural literature also received attention, and these poetic traditions consistently served as sources and themes for formal Persian literature (Frye, 1979: 189).

The Samanids, along with their viziers, advisors, and scholars, consciously adopted effective measures to promote and empower the Persian language. They offered refuge and support to scholars and sages who fled the Abbasid Caliphate for fear of persecution, and they generously rewarded poets (Lazard, 2001: 511–522).

The Samanids were a native and ancient Iranian dynasty in Transoxiana who, through their Tajik/Persian lineage, maintained a deep connection with the Persian cultural and civilizational heritage. They regarded themselves as heirs to ancient Iran and, on this basis, adopted Persian as the official language of governance, bureaucracy, culture, and literature. (Hosseini–Izadi, 2015: 62). The institutionalization of Persian during the Samanid era not only solidified Iranian identity in the Islamic period but also paved the way for the flourishing of Persian literature and the emergence of renowned poets such as Ferdowsi and Rudaki.

This linguistic policy was a conscious response to the dominance of Arabic in the Persianate world and an effort to revive Persian culture and language within an Islamic framework. Moreover, the formalization of Islam as a unifying force in the Samanid realm created the need to translate religious texts into Persian. The translation of the Qur'an into Persian was a foundational step toward localizing Islamic teachings and facilitating the understanding of religious concepts among non-Arabic-speaking populations.These translations represent the earliest stages of interaction between Islam and Persian culture and played a crucial role in expanding the Persian language in religious, scholarly, and social domains.

Overall, by integrating Islamic identity with Persian cultural traditions, the Samanids not only institutionalized the Persian language within governmental and cultural structures but also laid the foundations for a Persian–Islamic civilization whose influence continued for centuries (Hosseini–Izadi, 2015: 62).

During the reign of Nuh ibn Mansur in 976 CE, known as Nuh III, he immediately commissioned Abu Mansur Daqiqi to translate the Book of Kings—which had been translated into Arabic two centuries earlier by the renowned Shu'ubi scholar, Rozbeh ibn Dādūyeh (Ibn al-Muqaffa')—back into Persian. Daqiqi died unexpectedly one year after beginning this monumental task. After his death, the continuation of the work was entrusted to another poet, Ferdowsi of Tus, who devoted thirty years to composing this national epic of Iran. Ferdowsi incorporated Daqiqi's one thousand verses into the final version of the Shahnameh. Unfortunately, when Ferdowsi completed his work in 1010 CE, he no longer enjoyed the political and financial support of his Samanid patrons, as they had fallen from power. The reward he received from his new patron, Mahmud of Ghazni—a warlord of mixed Turkic and Tajik background—left him bitter and disappointed.left him disillusioned. (Foltz, 2019: 125) Considering the points discussed above, it becomes evident that most previous studies have primarily focused on the contributions and activities of the Samanid government in promoting the Persian language and supporting oppressed Persian-speaking communities in the region. However, what distinguishes the present study is its examination of the nature and causes of the rise of Persian's grandeur and prestige, as well as the trajectory of its decline particularly language usage leading to its current status.

In this research, the position of the Persian language is analyzed across three distinct historical periods:

1. The era before the rise of the Samanids up to the end of their rule;
2. The period from the arrival of the Russian Tsars in the nineteenth century in Uzbekistan until their withdrawal;
3. Post-independence Uzbekistan and the contemporary condition of the Persian language in recent decades.

The Samanids

Before the Samanids entered the political structure of the caliphal governors in Khorasan, they belonged to the class of *Farmar* (landholding gentry) of Khorasan and Transoxiana (Narshakhi, 1972: 82). In the early Islamic centuries, the dehqāns were among the most important strata of Persian-speaking society, with roots extending back to the Sasanian era. They inherited agricultural lands from their ancestors and managed them with competence and skill. Their honorable way of life and their remarkable sense of responsibility toward the people granted them a relatively high and respected social status. They were engaged in agriculture and were generally regarded as exemplary farmers in their regions. Despite their limited literacy, they possessed a solid understanding of social conditions and the status of individuals in their communities, as well as awareness of broader political developments. In the early Islamic centuries, the dehqāns of Khorasan and Transoxiana acquired a position distinct from that of dehqāns in other regions. During this period, they gradually gained greater power, influence, and prestige among the people. This development stemmed from the political vacuum that emerged after the fall of the Sasanian Empire and before the consolidation of Arab Muslim rule in Iran. Local leaders and some Sasanian nobles sought to establish authority and form governments in these regions, which were far from the center of the caliphate (Zarrinkub, 1988: 191). Their rivalries, combined with the incursions of Turkic tribes following the collapse of the Sasanian defensive frontiers, and the confrontations between caliphal agents and local powers, created a period of political and social instability. In this turbulent environment, the dehqāns emerged as the only trusted and reliable social group. People turned to them for guidance and solutions. Supported by local communities, the dehqāns organized military forces to resist scattered invasions and constructed fortresses and garrisons. The inhabitants of these regions, seeking security, assisted the dehqāns and viewed their own welfare as dependent on the strength of these local leaders. They preferred these native, culturally and economically connected figures over foreign or non-local military commanders. As a result, the dehqāns of Khorasan and Transoxiana gradually developed two major distinctions from their counterparts elsewhere: first, they generally possessed larger tracts of land and greater financial resources; second, unlike other dehqāns, they formed small but relatively stable military forces with popular support and built fortresses and garrisons to house them. Narshakhi reports the existence of seven hundred kūshks (small fortresses) outside the city of Bukhara in the late first Islamic century (Narshakhi, 1972: 42). In the early Islamic period, some dehqāns in various regions of Khorasan and Transoxiana held superior positions and commanded other dehqāns (Gardizi, 1984: 228). It appears that the Samanids, in

the region of Balkh, occupied such a position. However, this Persian lineage did not achieve significant prominence during the Umayyad period. Even under the Abbasids, until the arrival of al-Ma'mun, the family did not enjoy notable fame. Al-Ma'mun, during his rule over Khorasan and his rivalry with al-Amin, needed capable and competent local elites. Thus, from the moment he arrived in Khorasan, he relied on Asad ibn Saman and his sons to suppress the rebellion of Rafi' ibn Layth and to administer the region (Narshakhi, 1972: 105)

This "Saman Khuda", as a gesture of sincerity toward his friend, the local governor, named his son Asad. Asad Saman converted to Islam and had four sons: Nuh, Ahmad, Yahya, and Ilyas. The young Samanid brothers accompanied the governor in 819 CE to suppress a rebellion in Samarkand. In recognition of their services, the Abbasid government appointed all four brothers as deputy governors, replacing the Umayyads who had held these positions seven decades earlier. Samarkand was granted to Nuh, the Ferghana Valley to Ahmad, Chbdach (present-day Tashkent, known to the Arabs as Shash) to Yahya, and Herat in eastern Khorasan to Ilyas (Richard Foltz, 2019: 107–110).

From the time the Saffarids gained superior military power in their long struggle with the rulers of Khorasan, the need for unity among local forces to establish a broader government became increasingly evident. In the face of the Saffarids' advance—which threatened the regional influence, status, and interests of the dehqāns and landowners—the dehqāns gradually reached a form of tacit, unwritten agreement to strengthen one family from among themselves. They preferred the leadership of the Samanid family, who were themselves dehqāns, due to their legitimacy and their fair conduct toward the local population. Thus, they supported the Samanids politically and militarily in order to benefit in return from their rise to power (Ibn Athir, 2020: 133). The emerging power of Ya'qub ibn Layth in the eastern and southern regions, and later in Khorasan, caused deep concern for the Abbasid caliphate, as he represented the first expansionist government in the eastern territories of the caliphate. Therefore, when Ya'qub entered Nishapur in 259 AH and occupied the Tahirid domains in Khorasan, the Abbasid caliph al-Mu'tamid sought to rely more heavily on the Samanid family

in the northeastern regions of Iran. At that time, Nasr ibn Ahmad ibn Asad Samanid ruled Samarkand with relatively weak authority, alongside other members of his family, over a large part of Transoxiana. This rule was extremely fragile in the face of a potential invasion by Ya‘qub. Al-Mu‘tamid, both to strengthen Nasr’s authority in Transoxiana and to signal opposition to any possible advance by Ya‘qub into the region, took advantage of Ya‘qub’s preoccupation in Tabaristan in 260 AH (Ibn Isfandiyar, 1941: 245). Seeking to create a rival power and a firm barrier against Ya‘qub’s expansion in northeastern Iran, he immediately dispatched the decree of governorship over Transoxiana to Nasr ibn Ahmad ibn Asad Samanid (Narshakhi, 1972: 109).

Furthermore, by establishing a strong Samanid government in Transoxiana, the Abbasids could use it as a permanent threat against the Saffarids—especially during their westward advances toward Iraq. In the event of serious conflict between the Saffarids and the Abbasids, the Samanids, by opening a military front behind Saffarid lines in Khorasan, could place them in grave danger. In this manner, the Samanid state under the leadership of Nasr came to power. It is worth recalling that the Samanids traced their lineage to Bahram Chobin. Patriotism, shared identity, and the Samanids’ ancestral connection to the Sasanians were the primary motivations behind their support and protection of the Persian language (Shah-Hosseini, 1977: 183–185). It is therefore clear that the Samanids sought to preserve a language to which they felt culturally and genealogically connected. This language had already been widely used for daily communication in the region—meaning that it was a fully developed linguistic system prior to their rule (Shah-Hosseini, 1977: 462). In fact, it was Ya‘qub ibn Layth al-Saffari who first drew the attention of scholars to the use of Persian instead of Arabic. According to the History of Sistan, when Ya‘qub conquered Herat, a poet recited verses in Arabic in his praise. Ya‘qub replied: “Why should something be said that I do not understand?” This prompted Muhammad ibn Sakkaki, his secretary, to compose praise in Persian (History of Sistan, 1935: 209–210).

What had begun with Ya‘qub continued with determination during the Samanid era. It is said that the Samanids attributed even greater antiquity and legitimacy to the Persian language, and by referring to the Qur’anic verse “We sent no messenger except in the language of his people” (Qur’an 14:4), they believed that from the time of Adam to the time of Ishmael, all prophets and kings of the earth had spoken Persian, and that the rulers of the Ajam had always used Persian (Ṭabari, 1960: 4–5). Whether or not this belief has historical validity is not the concern here; what matters is that such a perception reflects the profound devotion and unwavering attachment to the Persian language. This very passion and enthusiasm created the conditions for the flourishing of Persian and enabled the first stage of Persian language planning to take shape.

For the first time, one hundred notable figures from Khorasan, thirty-nine from Bukhara, and several from Samarkand engaged in literary activity during this period (Nafisi, 1957: 234–240). The Samanid rulers paid special attention to writers and poets. At the order of Nasr Samanid, Rudaki versified Kalila wa Dimna in Persian. Likewise, Daqiqi began versifying the Shahnameh during the reign of Nuh ibn Mansur. Ferdowsi’s Shahnameh must also be

regarded as another legacy of the Samanid era. Tāj al-Maṣādir, considered the first Persian lexicon, is attributed to Rudaki (Nafisi, 1957, p. 389). Kitāb al-Tārīkh fī Akhbār Khurāsān, one of the most authoritative historical works, written byAbdul Hasan Ali bin Muhammad Madaini was also written during this period (Nafisi, 1957: 240).

The Samanid government not only encouraged writing in Persian through gifts and patronage but also made the use of Persian mandatory for scribes and administrative offices. When Abu'l-Faḍl Bal'ami became vizier, he ordered that the government bureaus be converted from Arabic to Persian, and all court correspondence, contrary to previous custom, was conducted in Persian. (Nafisi, 1957: 333; Bahar, 1958: 282). This practice continued not only under the Samanids but also during the reigns of Mahmud of Ghazni and the Seljuks (Nafisi, 1957: 333; Bahar, 1958: 282). These measures, combined with the people's need for their mother tongue, enabled Persian to rise from near extinction to a peak of cultural brilliance. In reality, after the Arab conquest of Iran and the greater Iranian world, Persian had reached the brink of decline and disappearance; yet the Tajik-origin Samanids, through systematic cultural programs, purposeful policies, and a strong sense of shared linguistic and identity bonds, elevated this fading language to new heights of glory.

The founder of the Ghaznavid Empire was Mahmud ibn Sebuktigin (reign 998–1030 CE). Mahmud was the son of a former soldier-slave who eventually became the semi-independent ruler of Ghazna under Samanid suzerainty. His mother was a Tajik noblewoman from a wealthy landowning family of Zabulistan, the legendary homeland of Rostam, the hero of the Shahnameh. Mahmud's reign is often considered the beginning of Turkic rule in the Islamic world, although he himself was half Tajik. He promoted both Turkic and Iranian culture, and in some cases favored the latter even more. One of the remarkable paradoxes of history is that from the eleventh to the twentieth century, Turkic-led states—from Anatolia to India—became the principal patrons of Persian civilization, a process that began with Mahmud of Ghazni. The reason Turkic rulers adopted Persian as their official language and promoted Persianate culture was the prestige of Persian civilization and its value as a means of legitimizing their authority as rulers of an Islamic empire (Foltz, 2019: 139). The Turks, indeed, made invaluable contributions to the revival and expansion of the Persian language.

The Arrival of the Russian Tsars in Central Asia

For the first time in 1715, Peter the Great dispatched his forces to the Kazakh steppe, at the confluence of the Irtysh and Ertis rivers. In 1716, several military fortresses were constructed along the banks of the Irtysh, and finally, in 1717, an army under the command of Prince Bekovich-Cherkassky marched toward Khiva (Rywkin, 1987: 12). With the death of Peter the Great, Russia's expansionist policy in Central Asia was temporarily halted; however, the foreign policy strategies he had designed soon became the guiding principles for the actions of subsequent Russian tsars. Peter had instructed his successors to weaken Iran by fomenting internal divisions, to reach the Persian Gulf, to revive the ancient trade routes linking the Near East to the Mediterranean, and then to advance toward India, "the land containing the treasures of the world" (Curzon, 1994: 716). For several centuries, the central axis of Russian policy was the pursuit of India through Central Asia—an objective strongly emphasized in

Peter's testament (Afshar Yazdi, 1979: 42). After the Treaty of Tilsit between Napoleon and Paul I in 1807, the plan for an invasion of India was revived in negotiations between France and Russia, who had allied against Britain (Hobbs, 2000: 16). The Russian tsar dispatched a force of 22,500 Cossacks to advance toward India through Bukhara and Khiva. The assassination of Paul I, however, altered Russia's foreign policy, and the eastward advance of these forces beyond the Caspian Sea was halted. Following Napoleon's defeat and Russia's emergence as a major power, its policy took a new shape, and the Russians became determined to overthrow the khanates of the region (Shirazi, 1991: 111). In 1833, under the pretext of protecting commercial caravans, the Russian government established a fortress at Qizil-Dash (Sarli, 1994: 37). The Russians launched their first major incursion into Central Asia under the pretext of the plundering of merchants' goods and the capture of Russian subjects. To this end, in 1839, a force of 3,000 Russian infantry, accompanied by 200 Cossacks and 22 artillery pieces under the command of Count Perovsky, began a large-scale operation across the Ural steppes. The campaign was unsuccessful. Before reaching the Ust-Yurt plateau, Perovsky ordered a retreat. The troops, suffering heavy losses due to severe winter conditions, returned to Orenburg. After this major failure, Russian commanders decided to plan more carefully for the conquest of the vast plains stretching to the Aral Sea. Finally, in 1846, they captured the mouth of the Syr Darya River. Russia established a military garrison in the region and another base at the port on the Aral Sea (Sachs, 2001: 512).

With the outbreak of war against the Ottomans in Crimea, Russia's military operations in Central Asia slowed for several years; however, once the war ended, Russian expansion toward the eastern regions resumed. Russia's defeat in Crimea intensified its hostility toward Britain, whom it blamed for its loss. Russian leaders concluded that European powers, especially Britain, would not allow them to advance into the Balkan Peninsula; therefore, Russia's motivation to conquer Central Asia grew even stronger (Houshang Mahdavi, 1985: 283).

In 1855, with the capture of Tashkent—located between the Aral Sea and Lake Issyk-Kul—Russia effectively entered what is now Uzbekistan and became a direct neighbor of the three khanates of Khiva, Bukhara, and Kokand. Thus, the first phase of Russia's advance into Central Asia came to an end (Sachs, 2001: 513).

The social and political structures of the Kokand Khanate in the east, the Bukhara Emirate in the center, and the Khiva Khanate in the west were still underdeveloped. Kokand, located in the fertile Ferghana Valley and one of the oldest cities of Central Asia, lay southeast of Tashkent. Amir 'Alim Khan, the founder of the Kokand Khanate (1800–1809), governed these regions, and his power rivaled that of the Emir of Bukhara.

The territory of the Khiva Khanate lay south of the Aral Sea, with the Amu Darya River flowing through it. The Emir of Bukhara ruled over vast lands between the Syr Darya and Amu Darya rivers, including the fertile and wealthy Zarafshan Valley. The historic cities of Bukhara and Samarkand were located within his domain, and the population of Bukhara consisted of Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Tajiks, and a number of Arabs (Alim Khan, 1994: 32–33).

These three khanates had separated from one another after the assassination of Nader Shah in mid-eighteenth century and operated autonomously within their respective territories.

At this time, Central Asia was governed by three local polities:

- ***Bukhara.***

The demographic composition of Bukhara was more deeply rooted in historical authenticity than other regions of Transoxiana. The Tajiks were the original and most culturally developed inhabitants of the region. In terms of intellectual life, lifestyle, culture, and civilization, they possessed a notable superiority over other populations of Transoxiana. From the Mongol invasions to the Russian conquest of Central Asia, the Tajiks suffered the greatest losses. The incursions of nomadic tribes into the culturally rich western and southern parts of Transoxiana posed additional challenges for the Tajiks; yet ultimately, they were defeated by the expanding Russian Empire (Spuler, 1995: 38).

- ***The Kokand Khanate (Ferghana).***

While the Tajiks established a powerful emirate in Bukhara, in neighboring Ferghana—whose population consisted of both Tajiks and Uzbeks—the dominant political force was Uzbek. The city of Kokand, located in present-day Uzbekistan, remained the center of an independent khanate until the Russian occupation (Verhram, 1993: 301).

- ***The Khiva Khanate (Khwarazm).***

The ancient land of Khwarazm, historically regarded as the birthplace of the Iranian peoples and Airyanem Vaejah, was ruled by Uzbeks in the nineteenth century. Khiva was a vast and fertile territory but had been weakened by Turkmen and Kazakh uprisings (Barthold, 1997: 270).

The independent khanates of Transoxiana in the nineteenth century shared similar governmental structures. The most important institution for all three was the military. A strong and organized army ensured their independence and territorial integrity. At the apex of power stood the emir, who served as commander-in-chief (Sarli, 1985: 131). Russia exploited the internal weaknesses of these khanates to penetrate the region.

With their domination of Central Asia in the second half of the nineteenth century, the Russians prioritized two major objectives:

Expansion of the Russian language.

To expand their territorial influence and counter perceived threats from Britain and France, the Russians vigorously promoted the spread of the Russian language and the demographic expansion of Russian settlers. Large numbers of Russians from Ukraine and other regions were relocated to Central Asia to promote Russification and alter the demographic composition of the region (Central Asia Report, 2004: 194).

After thirty-three years of warfare, Russia succeeded in fully occupying Central Asia. In 1866, the Kokand Khanate fell; in 1868, Bukhara; and in 1873, Khiva. Peace treaties were subsequently signed with each khanate (Rywkin, 1990: 11–13).

Despite this, in 1916, during World War I, the Russian Empire's attempt to conscript Central Asian populations met fierce resistance in the Ferghana Valley, particularly among Tajiks and Uzbeks. The uprising was brutally suppressed, igniting further unrest across the region. After the fall of the Tsarist regime in 1917, the people of the Ferghana Valley briefly took control of Kokand. During this period, the population split into two groups: supporters of

the Bolsheviks and anti-Soviet rebels known as the Basmachis. Although the Soviets crushed the rebellion in the early 1920s, resistance never fully disappeared.

During 120 years of Russian domination in Central Asia, alongside economic pressures, ethnic and cultural assimilation policies were aggressively pursued. Through the expansion of the Russian language, the suppression of Islam, and the elimination of Persian, Russia fundamentally transformed the cultural landscape of the region.

All Tajik *maktabs* and schools in the historic cities of Bukhara, Samarkand, and other Tajik-populated areas were closed; Persian libraries were destroyed; and speaking Tajik Persian was prohibited. Prior to Russian arrival, Persian had been the official and administrative language of all three khanates. Knowledge of Russian became a key criterion for demonstrating loyalty to the Russian state. This period marked the beginning of the decline of the Persian language in Central Asia. The primary objective of Russian policy was to replace Persian with Russian, erase ethnic and linguistic identities, and rewrite the region's history and culture (Sheikh Attar, 1992: 17–21).

As a continuation of these policies, the Russians divided Central Asia into five republics without regard for historical or ethnic boundaries—an arrangement that has remained a source of border and ethnic tensions among these states to this day. In this unjust division, a large portion of the Tajik population living in historic cities such as Bukhara, Samarkand, Namangan, Ferghana, Surkhandarya, and others was incorporated into the political territory of Uzbekistan—an act that Tajiks consider a betrayal and a historical injustice. Ultimately, after the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan, the Russians withdrew from the region in 1991, and the five Central Asian republics declared independence.

Uzbekistan's Independence in 1991

When the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic was established in 1924 as one of the republics of the Soviet Union, the Tajiks were placed under Uzbek authority within the framework of the Tajik Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, which became part of the Uzbek SSR. This arrangement lasted for more than five years until 1929, when the Tajik SSR was recognized as a separate union republic. However, this change did not mean the complete removal of Tajiks from Uzbek dominance. The inclusion of Samarkand and Bukhara—two major cultural, historical, and civilizational centers of the Tajiks—within the borders of the Uzbek SSR became the first source of modern tensions between Uzbeks and Tajiks (Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic).

Uzbekistan is one of the Central Asian countries whose population speaks Uzbek, Persian, and Russian; however, the official state language is Uzbek. The country covers an area of 447,000 square kilometers and has a population of 33,780,059. Its major cities include Bukhara, Khiva, Samarkand, and Tashkent (the capital). Uzbekistan is the most populous and militarily strongest country in Central Asia and is also considered the most industrialized state in the region (Bregel, 1991: 54). Prior to its forced incorporation into Russia, the indigenous inhabitants of what is now Uzbekistan were various Iranian peoples.

During the Islamic period, the Samanids ruled this geography for more than a century. After the Samanids, four major dynasties—the Qarakhanids, Seljuks, Ghaznavids, and

Khwarazmshahs—who were ethnically Turkic but all adopted Persian as their official language and continued to promote it, governed the region.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the three newly independent states of the region—Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan—faced territorial disputes. Uzbekistan claimed ownership of the city of Khujand in Tajikistan, while Tajikistan asserted historical, cultural, and territorial claims over the Tajik-populated cities of Bukhara, Samarkand, Ferghana, and Surkhandarya, which lie within Uzbekistan's borders. Likewise, the Osh region in Kyrgyzstan, inhabited largely by Uzbeks, became a source of tension between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, occasionally erupting into clashes between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz.

During the Tajik Civil War (1992–1997), concerns arose regarding the possible secession of Khujand and its annexation to Uzbekistan. Khujand, with a significant Uzbek population, at times threatened separation due to Uzbekistan's implicit support (Peymani, 1998: 29).

Accordingto demographic data provided by early twentieth-century anthropologists, the population ratio of Uzbeks to Tajiks in Bukhara, Samarkand, and the Ferghana Valley was approximately three to seven. (Koozehgar-Kalaji, 2017).The main concern of the Tajiks was the weakening and eventual disappearance of Persian–Tajik culture in Samarkand, Bukhara, and other Tajik-populated cities under Uzbek rule. For example, during the rule of Sharaf Rashidov1959-1983—member of the Politburo and First Secretary of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan—anyone speaking Persian in public offices or institutions in Samarkand and Bukhara was required to pay a fine of five Soviet rubles to the state treasury.

During Rashidov's era, one could speak any language except Persian. As a result, Persian speakers in Samarkand and Bukhara preferred Russian over Uzbek (Koozehgar-Kalaji, 2017).

Due to the political and administrative divisions imposed during the Soviet period, Tajik-populated regions such as Samarkand, Bukhara, Surkhandarya, Qashqadarya, Namangan, Ferghana, and Syrdarya were incorporated into the Uzbek SSR. Tajiks claim that millions of Tajiks living in Uzbekistan—especially in Samarkand, Bukhara, Termez, and Khwarazm—were forcibly relocated from Tajikistan to Uzbekistan as retaliation for Tajik Muslim resistance against the Bolsheviks (Chahryar, 2005: 292–296).

Therefore, the territorial division based on ethnic and linguistic identities became one of the key factors that, from the very beginning, created a structural divide between Tajiks and Uzbeks in the country. From the outset, numerous signs of ethnic and regional tensions were evident among the eastern, western, and central parts of Uzbekistan; each ethnic group and each province sought a greater share of political power. After independence in 1991, Islam Karimov, the former president of Uzbekistan, exploited these ethnic rivalries and regional tensions to weaken local power bases. In addition, nationalist and Islamist movements constituted two major influential currents in Uzbekistan. Based on this, Uzbek leaders believed that the country's security was threatened by Tajik-populated regions and that Tajiks living along the border with Tajikistan were not fully trustworthy. Consequently, Uzbek authorities confronted Tajik identity under the pretext of safeguarding national interests (Heydari, 2017).

This historical background and mindset led to the emergence of the Tajik-populated regions of Uzbekistan—and the policy of Uzbekization (the imposition of Uzbek culture,

language, and literature on the Tajik population)—as a political and security issue in relations between Dushanbe and Tashkent after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

One of the persistent problems between the two countries has been the downplaying of the Tajik population in Uzbekistan and the stark discrepancy between official and unofficial demographic figures. While early twentieth-century anthropologists reported that the population ratio of Uzbeks to Tajiks in Bukhara, Samarkand, and the Ferghana Valley was three to seven, the Uzbek State Statistics Committee announced on January 1, 2017, that Tajiks (Persian speakers) constituted only 4.8% of the country's population. Interestingly, this percentage was identical to the figure reported 26 years earlier in 1991. Tajiks in Uzbekistan, however, believe that their actual share is closer to 25–30%, and they insist that Tajiks constitute 70% of the population of Samarkand—the former capital and second-largest city of Uzbekistan—and more than 90% of the population of Bukhara. Reliable statistics on this matter, however, are unavailable (Heydari, 2017).

Regarding Tajik-populated regions of Uzbekistan, the Tajikistani government has consistently expressed concern that inaccurate demographic reporting and the imposition of Uzbek culture and language could weaken the traditional position of Tajiks, especially in the two historically significant cities of Samarkand and Bukhara. The process of Uzbekization was pursued vigorously during Islam Karimov's 25-year rule. For example, although the language of instruction in educational institutions—including Samarkand University, the oldest university in Central Asia founded by Lenin—had been Persian, it was changed to Uzbek after the collapse of the Soviet Union and Karimov's rise to power. .www.tabnak.ir/fa/new According to official statistics, during the Soviet era, there were 380 Tajik-language schools in Uzbekistan, but their number declined significantly during Karimov's 26-year presidency. Similar examples in cultural and social domains are numerous.However, after the sudden death of Islam Karimov in September 2016 and the rise of Shavkat Mirziyoyev, a process of de-escalation began in Uzbekistan–Tajikistan relations. Abdulaziz Kamilov, Uzbekistan's foreign minister, stated in an interview with Tajik television that "the time has come to restore long-severed ties" between the two countries.

The visit of Emomali Rahmon President of Tajikistan, from theTajik-populated regions of Uzbekistan, on September 26, 2018 ,the opening of the first international bus route "Tashkent–Khujand–Tashkent," permission for Tajik Railway passenger trains to stop in the Uzbek cities of Termez, Samarkand, and Qarshi, the resumption of direct flights between the two capitals, the threefold reduction in ticket prices, and proposals to launch new flights between Dushanbe and the cities of Bukhara and Samarkand—all contributed to reducing pressure on Tajik and Uzbek communities and strengthening cultural and social ties between the two nations (Policy Studies Network, 2018).

Overall, the opening of borders and the increase in cross-border interactions especially among Tajiks and Uzbeks who share extensive family and kinship ties have been among the most significant developments facilitating the reduction of tensions, mistrust, and suspicion between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Amid these developments, the reopening of the land borders between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan became another significant turning point, enabling contact between Tajiks on both sides of the frontier after nearly twenty-five years of separation. During Islam Karimov's presidency, only two of the sixteen border crossings between the two countries remained operational. However, during Shavkat Mirziyoyev's visit to Tajikistan on March 9, 2018, more than sixteen border crossings were reopened after two decades of closure. During Emomali Rahmon's visit to Tashkent in the summer of 2018, it was agreed that a treaty on strategic cooperation and an agreement on joint border demarcation would be signed by officials of both countries.

In this context, in March 2019, with the presence of Rajabboy Ahmadzoda, governor of Sughd Province in Tajikistan, and Turabjon Jurayev, governor of Samarkand Province in Uzbekistan, more than nine border crossings were reopened after many years. These included the "Sarazm–Jartepa" crossing in Panjakent, as well as "Urateppa–Kushkent," "Havatagh–Uchqorgon," "Zafarabad–Havastabad," "Hashtyak–Bekabad," "Nobonyod–Pap," "Rovat–Rovat," "Ayvach–Gulbahor," and the railway crossing "Khashdi–Amuzang."

Among these, the reopening of the Jartepa–Sarazm border crossing carried far greater symbolic significance. This crossing, which connects Uzbekistan's Samarkand Province with Tajikistan's Sughd Province, had been unilaterally closed by Uzbekistan in November 2010. At the initiative of Uzbek authorities, a three-meter-high, ten-meter-long wall had been built there—mockingly referred to by Tajik citizens as the "Islam Karimov Wall." During the reopening ceremony, this wall was demolished, and Tajik officials announced plans to construct a terminal and hotel at the Jartepa–Sarazm crossing.

Overall, the developments following Shavkat Mirziyoyev's rise to power have also affected Tajik-populated regions of Uzbekistan—such as Samarkand, Bukhara, Surkhandarya, Qashqadarya, Namangan, Ferghana, and Syrdarya—reducing, to some extent, the pressures and Uzbekization policies that characterized the Karimov era. Although this shift has not been unilateral, reciprocal flexibility has also emerged on the Tajik side regarding Uzbek culture and language, as well as Uzbek-populated areas of Tajikistan. One clear example was the visit of a delegation of Uzbek artists and cultural figures to Tajikistan to participate in the "Uzbekistan Cultural Days Festival" on May 10, 2017.

As time passes and Shavkat Mirziyoyev's domestic and international position becomes more firmly established, it will become clearer to what extent Uzbekistan's new leadership has distanced itself from the traditional policies of the Karimov era—particularly regarding Tajikistan—and how far the agreements between the two countries, especially in cultural and social spheres and in improving the situation of Tajiks in Uzbekistan and Uzbeks in Tajikistan, will be implemented in practice.

In the author's view, Uzbekistan's domestic political dynamics—strongly influenced by pan-Turkic ideological currents—do not offer a stable long-term outlook, and it seems unlikely that this diplomatic "honeymoon" will endure indefinitely.

Conclusion

A historical examination of the three major waves of suppression and revival of the Persian language demonstrates that Persian has functioned not merely as a communicative tool but as a cultural heritage and a foundational element of the identity of Iranian-descended peoples. Throughout history, it has played a decisive role in the political and cultural transformations of the region. In the first period—the confrontation with the Umayyad Caliphate following the conquest of Iran.

In the second period—the Samanid renaissance—Persian was not only revived but elevated to an official and scholarly status. This era exemplified the convergence of language, political authority, and historical identity. Tajik-origin leaders such as Ya‘qub ibn Layth al-Saffari and Nasr Samanid restored Persian from a marginal position to the center of politics, education, and cultural production. In this phase, Persian functioned as an instrument for revitalizing Islamic-Iranian civilization, demonstrating that the alliance between language and cultural elites plays an irreplaceable role in reconstructing collective identity.

The third wave—the modern suppression of Persian in Central Asia under Tsarist Russian rule—was characterized not by overt violence, as in the Umayyad period, but by gradual, administrative, and systematic measures. The removal of Persian from educational institutions, the prohibition of its use in media, and the severing of cultural ties between Tajiks of Central and South Asia and Iran formed part of a broader program of ethnic homogenization and historical disconnection. Crucially, these pressures continued even after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of the regional republics. In Uzbekistan, millions of Tajiks remained deprived of the right to education in their mother tongue—a deprivation that represents not merely a linguistic issue but a symbol of identity suppression and the weakening of historical continuity.

Based on the analysis of these three periods, Persian can be regarded as one of the rare examples of cultural resilience in the face of repeated attempts at erasure. Despite persistent threats, the language has survived—and at times flourished—thanks to historical memory, social endurance, and the active role of cultural elites. This historical trajectory is not only significant for linguists but also essential for scholars of identity studies, cultural policy, and ethnic relations.

If cultural policymakers, educational institutions, and language-rights advocates approach the preservation, revitalization, and development of Persian in the Persian-speaking regions of Central Asia without ethnic or political bias, such efforts will not only promote linguistic and cultural justice but also serve as an effective tool for strengthening peace, coexistence, and regional solidarity.

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