

COMPLEX BORDER PROBLEMS BETWEEN UZBEKISTAN AND KYRGYZSTAN: IS THERE A POSSIBLE SOLUTION?

Burak Çalışkan



İNSAMER

İHH İNSANİ VE SOSYAL ARAŞTIRMALAR MERKEZİ
IHH HUMANITARIAN AND SOCIAL RESEARCH CENTER
مركز البحوث الإنسانية و الاجتماعية

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 Analysis

Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who won the Uzbekistan's election in December 2016 after the death of his predecessor Islam Karimov, tried to take swift and radical steps in Uzbekistan politics and fix the old regime's foreign policy in relations with its neighbours and the international community.

With regards of Kyrgyzstan, the Mirziyoyev administration has made significant progress, particularly regarding problems such as communication and transportation between the two countries, especially in the unresolved border issues. In September 2017, the Uzbek leader organized an official visit to Kyrgyzstan, where both leaders agreed to open the border gate between the two countries that the Karimov regime closed unilaterally in 2010. The event was followed with the resolutions on other border problems that were considered simple, but continued for years. However, the complex border problems between the two countries,

including the five ethnic enclaves shared by the two countries, are tricky, and required careful resolutions.

It is best to leave bitter history in the past, and for the sake of the peoples of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, friendship, whether in its borders or between both administrations and peoples, should be developed.

The Soviet Union's construction of artificial borders was design by Joseph Stalin nearly a century ago to prevent unity between Central Asian peoples; and this constitutes the basis for the complex border problems experienced in the region today. There are four exclaves¹ of Uzbekistan in Kyrgyzstan, while Kyrgyzstan has one exclave in Uzbekistan.

Uzbek citizens living in Uzbekistan exclaves such as Sokh, Shakhimardan, Jani-Ayil and



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Chon Qora in Kyrgyzstan must pass through Kyrgyz border posts whenever they want to leave the enclaves. Similarly, the Kyrgyz citizens in Uzbekistan who live in Barak are faced with similar situation.

There were problems particularly between the local people and Kyrgyz border guards in Sokh, where more than 50,000 Uzbek citizens lived. Rebellions initiated by the people of the region resulted in the road and border closure at the time of the Bishkek administration. The Kyrgyz government did not approve the demand for a road linking Uzbekistan to Sokh. These tense bilateral relations took place in the period of Karimov.

However the more relaxed atmosphere brought by Mirziyoyev created a hope to these complex

border problems. As a matter of fact, the Uzbek and Kyrgyz authorities stated that they wanted to resolve the decades-long border dispute as soon as possible. But, it is not that easy to conclude this confusion between the two neighbours.

In 2017, Uzbek and Kyrgyz leaders carried out an exchange of small areas as a solution. It was believed that other border problems could be solved by this option. At this point, the negotiations on the Kyrgyz exclave Barak, had been going on for a while between the two countries. Until a few years ago, more than 1,000 Kyrgyz lived in Barak, and today there are only 70 people known to live there. The exchange of an area equivalent to Barak between the two countries has come up through the demand of the Kyrgyz citizens.



| Barak (Kyrgyz Exclave) | Sokh (Uzbek Exclave) | Shohimardan (Uzbek Exclave) | Jani-Ayil (Uzbek Exclave) | Chon Qara/Qalacha (Uzbek Exclave) |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|
| 2,3 km ² | 350 km ² | 90 km ² | 3 km ² | 9 km ² |

However the main issue lies on the attitude of the people in the exchange-proposed regions. It should be understood that the exchange of a large region with a 50,000 population such as Sokh is no walk at the park. Persuading the Uzbek people who have lived in the region for centuries to move elsewhere would be a very difficult and painful process.

The second option is the creation of corridors from the exclaves to each main countries, this includes giving the lands for the corridors to the countries. This will affect fewer people than the first option, but organizing border crossings after the building of corridors will create a greater confusion. The possibility of new problems in cross-regional access is the greatest concern for this option.

The third option is the creation of completely free and open borders between Uzbekistan and

Kyrgyzstan. This way, a solution resembling the Belgian-Dutch border is aimed. In a sense, this method will enable the peoples living in the exclaves to move comfortably to their main countries. Mirziyoyev himself mentioned that the two countries' border should be turned into a "border of friendship". Taking such a decision would encourage for the solution of the other border problems in Central Asia as well as for the Bishkek-Tashkent relations to an advanced level.²

No two neighbouring countries can sleep tight at night when the relationship between them is not constructive. It is best to leave bitter history in the past, and for the sake of the peoples of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyztan, friendship, whether in its borders or between both administrations and peoples, should be developed.

Sonnotlar

¹ A portion of territory of one state completely surrounded by territory of another or others, as viewed by the home territory.

² Pete Baumgartner, “Tug-Of-War: Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan Look To Finally Settle Decades-Old Border

Dispute” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, December, 14, 2017.

<https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-kyrgyzstan-resolving-decades-old-border-dispute/28918059.html>

