

# Peoples and Cultural Traditions

■ **Above:** Kazakh horseman with his eagle; the traditional sport of hunting with eagles is still practiced today. **Upper right:** Portrait of a young girl in Nakhur, Turkmenistan. Villagers claim ancestry from Alexander the Great's army. **Lower right:** Kyrgyz men riding a minibus along the Pamir Highway.



**T**he peoples of Central Asia today derive from a multitude of tribes and races, and from processes of assimilation, coercion, conquest, and migration. Some understanding of this complexity can be found in historical events.

### Rich and Turbulent Past

The area now called Central Asia was occupied in past millennia by Persian or Iranian tribes—mainly Persian-speaking nomads and settlers in the steppes, piedmonts, and mountains, and around rivers and oases in the more arid and desert areas. They developed irrigation for agriculture perhaps 5,000–6,000 years ago and large populations developed around the irrigated areas. The area of the present Uzbekistan is said to be one of the cradles of human civilization, containing some of the world's oldest sedentary populations and cities. Domestication of horses for transport in about 4,000 BC is attributed to these people.

Empires rose and fell. The Archaemenid Persian Empire, perhaps the largest empire of ancient times, covered the region from 550 BC to 330 BC.

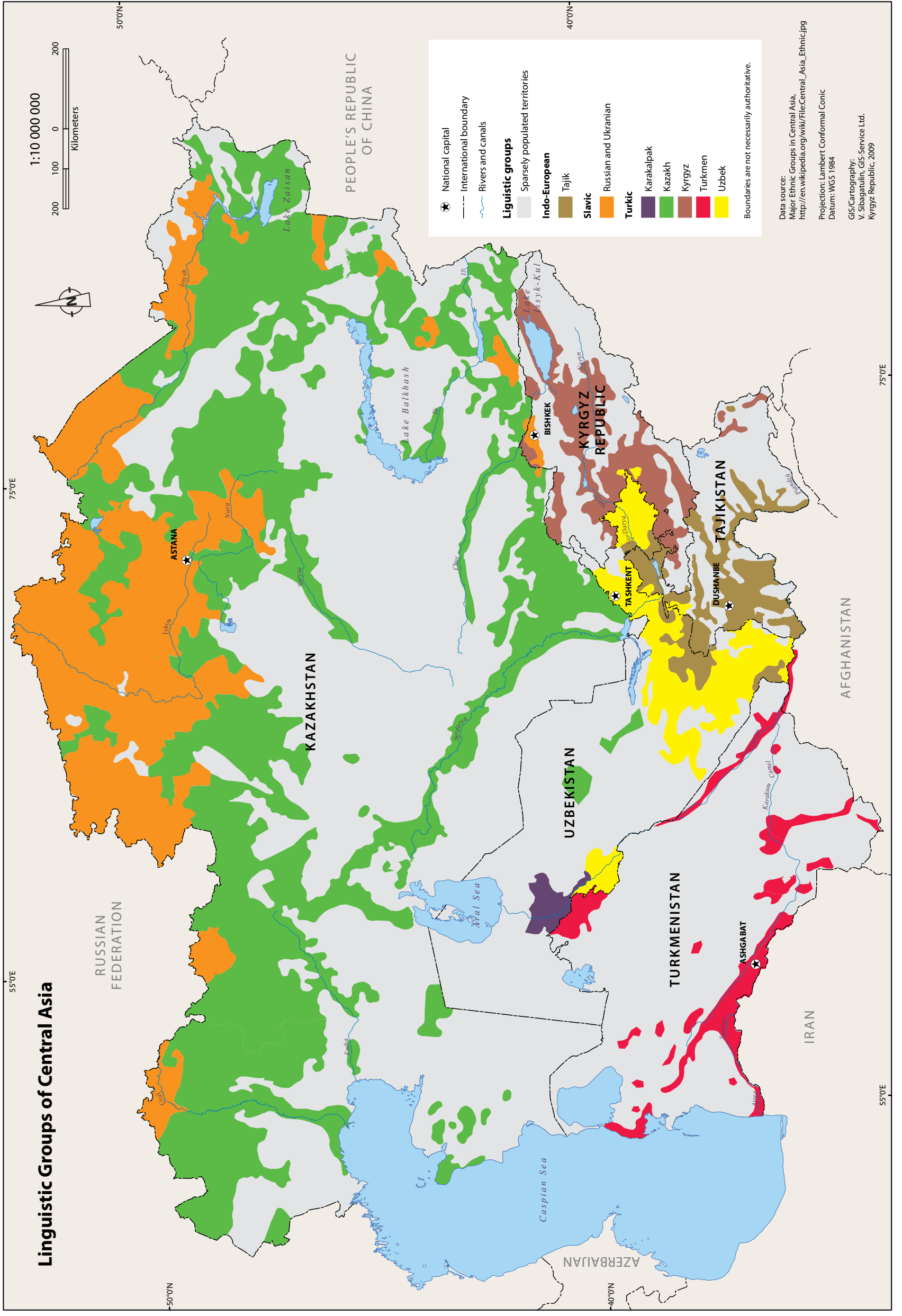
A Greek dynasty under Alexander the Great then held sway for more than a century until a nomadic tribe from the Central Asian steppe, the Parni, seized control and began the Parthian Empire, which assimilated Archaemenid and Greek culture and lasted until the 3rd century AD, when the Romans finally conquered the Parthians and took their almost incredible wealth to Rome.

Across the southwestern parts of the region, the Sassanid Persian Empire then arose. It replaced Greek cultural influence and restored Iranian traditions until Muslim Arab invasions swept across the region in the latter half of the 7th century. Arabic tribes and culture dominated much of the region over the next 3–4 centuries, establishing Islam as the main religion, and bringing what is described as a golden age of art, culture, and knowledge.

In the east of the region, Greek influence was replaced by that of the Kushan Empire that brought Indian influence and by the Chinese Han dynasty. The Persian language and culture persisted through the period of Arab control and by the 12th century, Persian (Farsi) had become the main written language.



# Linguistic Groups of Central Asia



Data source:  
Major Ethnic Groups in Central Asia  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Central\\_Asia\\_Ethnic.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Central_Asia_Ethnic.jpg)  
Projection: Lambert Conformal Conic  
Datum: WGS 1984  
GIS/ Cartography:  
V. Sibagatulin, GIS-Service Ltd.  
Kyrgyz Republic, 2009



Meanwhile, Turkic tribes, derived from Oghuz tribes from Mongolia in the east, became prominent in the region by the 6th century. One Islamic tribal group, under its leader Seljuk, came to power in the 11th century, occupying most of the region and spreading south into what is now Turkmenistan (and into Iran) and giving rise to the former name of the area: Turkestan, or Land of the Turks (which then also included the present-day Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region).

Turkmen came to be identified with these Oghuz, especially those who adopted Islam; later the term Turkmen replaced Oghuz altogether. The Turkmen gradually removed the Persian influence across Central Asia and Turkish people—the Oghuz Turks (or Turkmen), Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Khazars, and Kyrgyz—still dominate the region today.

Early in the 13th century, the Mongol tidal wave of Genghis Khan swept through the region, on the one hand destructive but on the other bringing security of trade along the Silk Road. Europeans, Marco Polo, among them, began to venture across Asia.

The Mongols were conquered by Uzbek tribes at the beginning of the 16th century. Over the next 4 centuries, the region was splintered into many khanates and emirates accompanied by almost incessant struggles for power. Uzbek rule was weakened, while the wealth of the region as a whole declined as ocean transport began to replace the Silk Road.

The rise of the British Empire in the west and of the Russian Empire to the north replaced Turkic



and Mongol influence as the British and Russians vied for control over the region through the 19th century in a 100-year “Great Game.” The Russian revolution of 1917 changed the dynamics of this conflict, when Russia annexed most of the region. The countries now known as Central Asia were formed in the 1920s as republics of the former Soviet Union.

The division of the region into five republics by the Soviets in the 1920s broadly followed ethnic and

■ **Clockwise from top:** Young woman in Tastubek, Kazakhstan; Turkmen Bride, Ashgabat, Turkmenistan; Young boy from Saty near Pavlodar, Kazakhstan; Ethnic Kyrgyz family, as denoted by the man’s hat, in their yurt in the Aksu Valley, Gorno Badakshan, Tajikistan.



■ Map of Central and East Asia, in Smith's *New General Atlas*, London, 1816, showing most of the terrain covered by the Silk Road; most of the present Central Asia was known as Independent Tartary (left side of the map).

### Silk Road to Hydrocarbon Highway

As early as the 2nd century BC, Chinese silk was well known and prized in Rome. It traveled there along a 7,000-kilometer route by horse and camel that passed through the lofty Pamir or Tien Shan ranges and across Central Asia. Magnificent cities arose at major stopover points (caravanserais), including Merv in what is now Turkmenistan and Bukhara and Samarkand in Uzbekistan. From these cities, the route went either along the Kazakhstan steppe around the northern side of the Caspian Sea or through the deserts and south of the Caspian into Persia (Iran).

Many other wares were traded along the routes, including spices and perfumes, medicines, jewels, and silverware—and slaves. Philosophies, religions, languages, scientific discoveries, technologies, and diseases also passed from east to west and west to east. Goods were bought and sold by traders along the way going in either direction and also to and from South Asia.

Armies used the routes. Those of Genghis Khan and successors, while brutal, made the way safer for travelers like Marco Polo, whose stories in the 13th century led to a flourishing of trade that finally came to an end in the 17th century as sea routes became more popular and profound economic and political changes overtook the Asian countries.

Collectively, the many routes are called the Silk Road, ironically a name that only dates from the 19th century. Now oil and gas pipelines crisscross the deserts and steppes where the caravans passed, taking a new product, energy, to distant countries.



■ The oldest of the three fortresses at Ayaz Qala, once a caravanserai, built around the 4th century BC in the Ellikqala region of present-day Karakalpakstan in Uzbekistan.





linguistic groups, but not entirely. For example, the division of the population of Fergana Valley among three republics—the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan—turned some ethnic communities into minority groups in a different country. Independence brought increased ethnic tensions as the countries began to exert their new nationalism.

## Tribes and Languages

Within the major ethnic groupings are various clans or tribes. For instance, the Kazakhs belong to one of three clans or tribes—the Lesser Horde in the west, Middle Horde in the north and east, and Great Horde in the south. Their language is a subgroup of northeastern Turkic languages, heavily influenced by both Tatar and Mongol.

The Kyrgyz belong to one of three groups of clans: left wing, right wing, or “neither.” They all share a common Turkic language. Prior to independence, Turkmen lived in many separate tribal and territorial groups, virtually independent from each other and speaking different dialects. Tribal affiliation has remained an important social factor up to the present. Major Turkmen tribes include the Tekke, Ersari, Yomud, Goklen, Salor, and Sarik.

The Tajiks have Persian roots and their Persian language has several geographically based dialects. Written Persian dates from the 5th century BC and the “modern” version, Farsi, was first written in the 9th century AD. The language was renamed Tajik



when the former Soviet republics were created. In one part of the country, Badakhshan, however, people speak several Pamir languages that have no script and are still not written.

Traditionally, the Turkic languages were only spoken. Histories and legends were passed on orally through elders appointed to the task and, in some groups, through poets who traveled with wealthy families. Kazakh was not written until the 1860s and Kyrgyz in 1919. Turkmen scholars and

■ **Clockwise from left:** Elderly Kyrgyz shepherd outside his yurt on an alpine plateau; Girls in traditional dress displaying some of the famous Turkmenistan carpets; Sunrise at the Tila-Kari Medressa (Muslim school) in Registran, Samarkand, Uzbekistan; Portrait of a Tajik man in traditional hat; Uzbek shuttle trader and daughter embroidering ceremonial clothes.



■ **Upper:** Buzakashi players.  
**Lower:** A magnificent Akhal-Teke horse with rider.

poets began to use a written language, Chaghatai, in the 18th century.

### Cultural Icons

Central Asia has a unique blend of cultural icons. Foremost among them is the horse, first domesticated in the region some 6 millennia ago. Horses extended the reach of travelers and warriors alike and accelerated the spread of cultures and religions. Horses were a major factor in the success of the Mongol hordes in their invasions.

Modern horse breeds range from the stocky Przewalski's horse from the steppe, the last surviving subspecies of wild horses, to the Akhal Teke breed, which has a special place in the culture of Turkmenistan. These are tall, slim horses of a golden color, furthest among the Central Asian breeds from the Przewalski's horse and are the ancestral breed of western racehorses. Other ethnic groups also take pride in their horses. Horses are said to be the wings of the Kyrgyz people. The Tajiks have their *lokai* breed and the Uzbeks the *karabair* breed, both horses of great endurance.

Horses are an essential ingredient of recreational activities in most of the region, in such games as horseback fighting, in which riders grapple to topple each other from their horses; horse racing over distances up to 100 kilometers; wrestling among horse riders for a goat carcass (buzakashi), a lively event depicting the chasing and beating

of a wolf that has attacked a livestock herd; and chase-the-girl, a wedding ritual involving the groom chasing and catching the bride—both on horseback.

Bactrian, or two-humped, camels were domesticated around the same time as the horse; these camels were used for transport and, by the 2nd millennium BC, in towing wheeled vehicles for farmers. The camel became for the sedentary groups what the horse was for the nomadic tribes. Horses were often associated with war, camels with trade: horses gave Genghis Khan's hordes advantage in battle; camels made possible the caravans that plied the Silk Road.

Falconry, using birds (mostly falcons and hawks, although the Kyrgyz also used golden eagles) to catch prey for humans, is a proud tradition with roots in the 1st or 2nd millennium BC. It was held in esteem as a noble sport across the region and beyond and is now popular worldwide. The Saker falcon is a favorite bird for falconry, a popularity, however, that has led to rapid decline of Central Asian Saker populations.

Ethnic groups throughout the region have one thing in common, the yurt, their compact, circular houses with dome roofs, made of a wooden frame covered in felt from the hides of sheep or other livestock. Of course, different tribes have different touches and motifs. All have the advantage of being quickly erected and dismantled for travel, as the nomadic communities move their herds from pasture to pasture.



Nomadic groups have traditionally crafted carpets for their yurts. The best-known carpets are those from Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, such as the “red rugs,” woven by nomadic tribes, principally Tekke Turkmen, who extract a wide variety of red and red-brown dyes from the madder plant for their carpets.

Women are skilled in exuberant and colorful embroidery and each ethnic group has its own distinctive patterns. Embroidery extends beyond garments to decorative motifs on animals, especially horses.

### The New Nomads

Formerly nomads who moved with their livestock across a relatively borderless expanse of deserts, steppes, and mountains, Central Asians found themselves bottled up by the Soviets. Nomadic pastoralism was still the main way of life in the region in the early 20th century and it virtually came to an end when the Soviets created their republics. Some ethnic groups found themselves on the wrong side of new borders that separated them from erstwhile neighbors. And this situation lasted more than 60 years.

The breakup of the Soviet Union also ended travel restrictions and unlocked borders in at least some of the Central Asian countries. There were sudden, large initial migration flows to ethnic or cultural homelands, some of it voluntary and some forced due to ethnic tension or conflict. In more recent



years, the motivation has been to seek better-paid jobs. Market opportunities in Kazakhstan—which lost at least 15% of its population during the early transition period—have made it now the largest receiving country in the region. Emigration from some of the region’s countries is spurred by degradation of pastureland at home. Pastoral nomads have become economic nomads.

■ **Upper:** Woman in colorful clothes, with her camel and its calf at Damla Oasis in the Karakum Desert, Turkmenistan. **Lower:** New Nomads: Tajik migrant workers on their way to a construction site in Moscow, Russia.