



MORĠĀB

MORĠĀB, district covering the Pamir Plateau in eastern Tajikistan, of which it is the administrative center. The name is transliterated as Murġob in Tajik orthography, Murgab in Russian, and Mù ěr jiā bù (慕尔塔什) in Chinese.

One of the six districts (*nohita, rayon*) of Badakṣān Province, Morġāb spreads over 38,440 km², covering 27 percent of Tajikistan's soil, an area the size of the U.S.A. states of Maryland and Delaware combined. Morġāb District borders on Kyrgyzstan to the north, China to the east, and Afghanistan to the south. Within Tajikistan it borders to the west on the districts of Eškāšm, Rāšt Qal'a, Šoġnān, Rōšān, Vanj, Dara, and Jirgatol.

The district occupies the entire eastern Pamirs, also known as the Roof of the World, a desolate plateau 3,500 to 4,000 m above sea level with scattered mountains of 1,000-1,500 m elevation, including the Somoni/Sāmāni peak at a height of 7,495 m at the northwestern corner. The glaciers of the district are among the largest in the world and are the main source of water in Central Asia. The treeless valleys of the plateau have a freezing climate with short, cool summers and a median annual temperature of -6 degrees Celsius. The median temperature of the town of Morġāb is 13° C in July and -20° C in January (Faqirov and Ġoibnazarov).

The district is so called after its chief river, Morġāb (not to be confused with the homonymous river in Marv or the Marvdašt in Fars). The stream originates from Afghanistan as the Āqsu and curves northwestward for 260 km until it joins the Oqbaytali to form the Morġāb proper, which travels an



additional 187 km westward; the lower course, the Bartang River, traverses 132 km of Rōšān District before becoming a tributary of the Panj/Oxus (Kudoiev; see also [ĀMU DARYĀ](#)). In 1911, a strong earthquake caused a huge landslide that blocked the Morġāb River permanently, resulting in the Sarēz Lake, which was filled in nine years, eventually holding some 16 km³ of water before it resumed discharge into the lower course of the river (see [Earthquakes ii. Central Asia](#)). The district is home to several other large lakes and mineral springs, among other natural attractions.

The barren, arctic-like climate and poor quality of the soil support little, if any, agriculture in Morġāb; hence no permanent settlements is reported there in history. The region was only sparsely populated by Kyrgyz nomadic pastoralists, who camped along the banks of the streams and lakes (Bliss, p. 98). The history of Morġāb actually begins in the 1930s with the construction of the Pamir Highway (Slavinskiĭ, ed., Introd.), which connects Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan to Kāroġ, the administrative center of Badaġšān Province of Tajikistan. Midway between these two towns, the township of Morġāb was founded as an outpost and administrative center of Morġāb District. After World War II, Morġāb and other small settlements of the district began absorbing the Pamiri-speaking Isma‘ili Tajik mountain dwellers, or the *ġalċa*, from their historical habitat in the western Pamir valleys; labor migration accelerated from the 1960s onwards to fill jobs created by road construction and maintenance, transportation, and the food service industry.

The Kyrgyz nomads, on the other hand, were settled in several Soviet-type pastoral *sovkhos* (state-owned farm) to raise cattle, sheep, and goats (Maanaev and Ploskikh, pp. 101 ff.; see also [Economy xii. In Tajikistan](#)). In spite of its considerable economic growth, the district’s population only reached above 10,000 in the 1980s (Faqirov and Ġoibnazarov); this was less than a quarter of one percent of that of all of Tajikistan, for a district that covers more than a quarter of the republic’s area.

The town of Morġāb is situated at 38.17° N and 73.97° E, 3,600 m above sea level, stretching on a slope along the right bank of the Morġāb River, at a distance of 416 km from Osh, 324 km from Kāroġ, and 850 km from Dushanbe. Its population, 4,000 in the early 1980s (Faqirov and Ġoibnazarov), grew (mostly due to new settlers fleeing the civil war) to nearly 7,000 in the 2000s, with Pamiri Tajiks and the Kyrgyz living in distinct quarters (Mostowlansky). The town is marked by its PATU, an acronym for *Pamirskoe avtotransportnoe upravlenie*, denoting the transport directorate in charge of road maintenance

and supporting truck transport (Mostowlansky). Morġāb has a small airport and receives its electricity from a local hydropower station. On a nearby mountain the Pamir Biological Institute, a branch of the [Tajikistan Academy of Sciences](#), is established to study the unique highland botany and biodiversity of the eastern Pamirs.

The distinct mountain ecosystem of the Morġāb has been endangered by human interference. Decades of estrangement from traditional nomadic life through Soviet settlement and the industrialization of animal husbandry has led to a drop in the productive potential of the highland bionetwork of the eastern Pamirs (see, e.g., The Christensen Fund). As energy supplies have become scarce since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the import of fuel increasingly expensive, the shrubs and bushes have become major source of energy for heating and cooking, resulting in devegetation of vast areas of land and an irreversible loss of soil (Pachova).

The independence of Tajikistan from the Soviet Union brought about substantial change in the socioeconomic fabric of Morġāb. Closing of the border with Kyrgyzstan put an end to free trade and travel between the two former Soviet republics, which took place along Osh-Ķāroġ artery that crosses Morġāb District. Russian military presence in the eastern Pamirs to secure Tajikistan's borders from politically troubled Afghanistan boosted Morġāb's economy, but that came to an end by the turn of the century, causing many jobless Pamiri Tajiks to return to their ancestral villages in the western Pamir river valleys, while animal husbandry remains in the hand of the Kyrgyz inhabitants of Morġāb (Mostowlansky). Nevertheless, as trade between Tajikistan and China is expanding rapidly, a highway is under construction between Kashgar and Dushanbe that cuts through the eastern Pamir and is expected to open new possibilities for Morġāb's economy. Moreover, for the first time in history, this international highway, called Murgab-Tashkurgan, will directly connect Tajikistan to the eastern slopes of the Pamir plateau, which opens into Tashkurgan Tajik Autonomous District in Xingjian Province of the People's Republic of China.

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