



Republic of Uzbekistan

Country Report

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 Uzbekistan is a landlocked, post-Soviet republic in Central Asia that lies at the intersection of a number of historic cultures and civilizations. Since gaining independence from the USSR, Uzbekistan has had an authoritarian government. Uzbekistan’s Jewish community has dramatically decreased in size. Known as Bukharan Jews, most Jews from Uzbekistan have immigrated to the United States or Israel. *Read more.*

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 Slightly larger than California, Uzbekistan is a landlocked country that lies in the heart of Central Asia. Its position on the Silk Road gave rise to a rich blend of cultures. Uzbekistan was part of the Soviet Union before gaining independence in 1991. It has the largest population of all five post-Soviet republics in Central Asia. *Read more.*

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Executive Summary:

While Uzbekistan is a republic encompassing executive, legislative, and judicial branches, real power is concentrated in the President. The Uzbek government denies many freedoms provided for in the country's constitution; independent NGOs and human rights groups are routinely denied registration, and the press is largely self-censored because of government repression. Law enforcement and security services appear to operate without constraint; allegations of human rights abuses are common.

Though among the poorest of Soviet republics, Uzbekistan did not experience an economic downturn as drastically as other successor states after the fall of the USSR, mostly due to its postponement of macroeconomic and structural reforms, as well as its continued reliance on subsidies, price controls, and exports.

Following independence, Uzbekistan instituted itself as a leader in Central Asia through the establishment of bilateral ties and agreements with its neighbors. However, Uzbekistan's relations with its neighbors are fraught due to ongoing disputes over water sharing and border demarcation have been aggravated by the Uzbek government's claims that Uzbek dissidents have found sanctuary in neighboring states, namely Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

In the late 1980s, Uzbekistan's Jewish population measured 120,000. Following the fall of the Soviet Union, mass emigration to Israel, the U.S., and Germany, diminished the population. Many who left did so out of concern for growing Uzbek nationalism and the rapid revival of Islam in the region. Today's Bukharan Jewish community is estimated at around 2,000 members; most other Uzbek Jews are of Ashkenazic heritage. The Jewish community in Tashkent enjoys positive relations with the Uzbek government. Many Jewish institutions operate throughout Uzbekistan, providing resources and opportunities for community members to engage in Jewish life.

History:

Slightly larger than California, Uzbekistan is a landlocked country that lies in the heart of Central Asia; its geography is characterized mostly by flat desert, while its river valleys are densely irrigated and

Statistics:

Population: 32,294,430 (May 2018 est.)

Size: 447,400 sq km

Capital: Tashkent
Major cities: Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara

Jewish population: >5,000
1989-2007 Aliyah: 84,095
2011-2013 Aliyah: 568

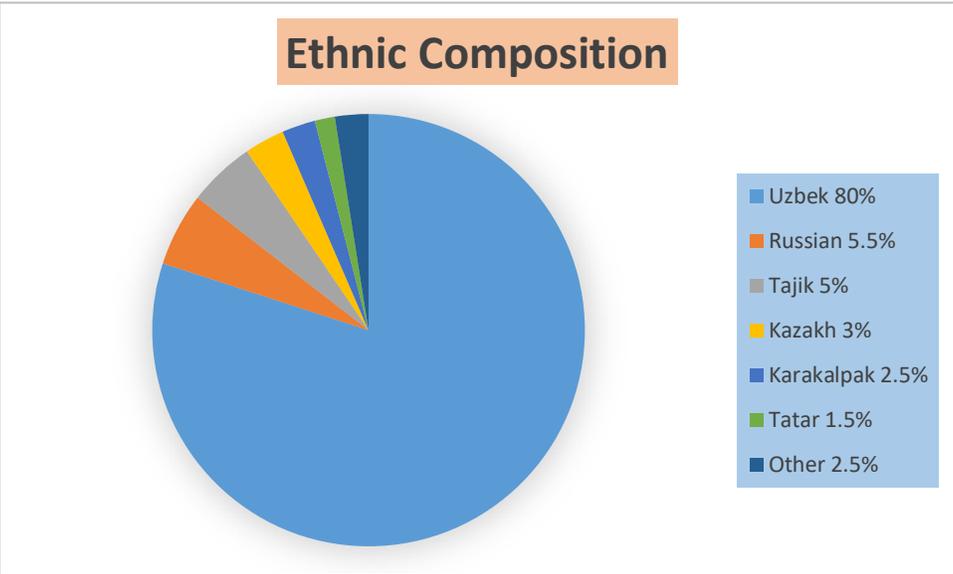
Head of State: President Shavkat Mirziyoyev
Head of Government: Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov
Foreign Minister: Abdulaziz Kamilov

Ambassador to United States: Bakhtiyar Turadjanovich Gulyamov
U.S. Ambassador to Uzbekistan: Daniel Rosenblum

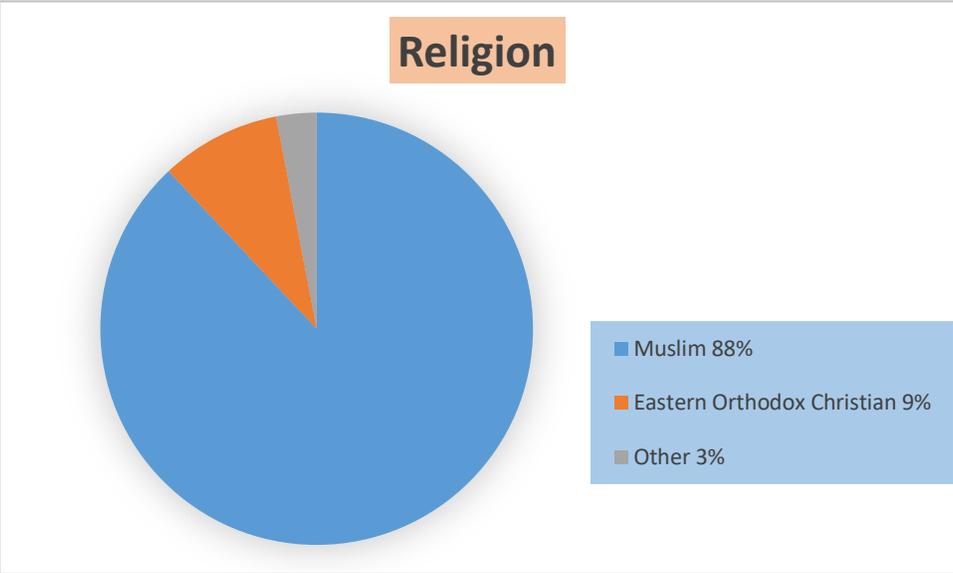
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cultivated. Uzbekistan borders Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, and is home to Central Asia's largest population (estimated at around 30 million in 2014).

As a consequence of its strategic location at the heart of the Silk Road connecting European and Asian traders, as well as being home to the famed cities of Samarkand and Bukhara, Uzbekistan has been ruled alternately by the Persians, Alexandrine Greeks, Arabs, Mongols, Turks, Russians, and Soviets.



For nearly 2,000 years, a large community of Jews, called the Bukharans, has existed in the country. Currently, a large variety of local and international Jewish organizations operate in the country and enjoy friendly relations with the government. While anti-Semitic incidents are rare, a group of suspicious attacks on Uzbek Jews in 2006 raised concerns. The activity of domestic Islamic terror groups is also an



issue of concern to the Jewish community. Though steady during the initial post-Soviet era, Jewish emigration to Israel and the United States has subsided somewhat in recent years.

Political Situation:

While Uzbekistan is a republic encompassing executive, legislative, and judicial branches, real power is concentrated in the President. Its bicameral parliament holds elections every five years, while the President appoints the Prime Minister, the cabinet, and Supreme Court justices, all of whom are confirmed by the parliament. The judiciary is not considered independent.

The Uzbek government denies many freedoms provided for in the country's constitution; independent NGOs and human rights groups are routinely denied registration, and the press is largely self-censored as a result of government repression. Law enforcement and security services appear to operate without constraint; allegations of human rights abuses are common.

Uzbekistan's President, Islam Karimov, was first elected in 1991, after serving as the leader of the country's Communist Party since 1989. In 1995, he extended his rule for an additional five years via referendum and was reelected in 2000, winning by a reported 91.9% of the popular vote. A 2002 referendum extended presidential terms to seven years, prolonging Karimov's rule to 2007. Though the constitution barred him from running for reelection, Karimov nevertheless won an additional seven-year term in 2007. Karimov was reelected for a fourth term in 2015, violating Uzbekistan's current constitution.

Though religious freedom is officially guaranteed, a 1998 law severely restricted the freedoms of "unofficial" religious organizations, namely Islamic and Christian groups perceived as radical or "non-traditional." The government is especially concerned with regulating Islamic worship, given the perceived threat of domestic Islamic terror cells. Most other religious communities have received government approval and are free to practice, although in 2008, the Uzbek Justice Ministry refused an accreditation request by the country's chief rabbi, Abba Gurevitch. The ministry said Gurevitch failed to provide proper documentation, while others say the move represented an attack on religious freedom. Rights of property, emigration, and internal migration are otherwise generally respected.

Increased military operations in Central Asia in the wake of 9/11, coupled with Uzbekistan's repression of suspected Islamist extremists, have diminished the strength of radical Islamic groups. In 1999, 2000, and 2004, local Islamic militants attempted to assassinate President Karimov, staged deadly bombings, clashed with the military, and attacked government sites – including the American and Israeli diplomatic missions in Tashkent and Bukhara – resulting in numerous casualties. Despite vigorous counterterrorism efforts, Uzbekistan's most prominent jihadist group, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (a.k.a. Islamic Movement of Turkestan), continues its efforts to overthrow the government and install an Islamic regime. The human rights community has criticized the Uzbek government for detaining suspects without cause as well as for alleged torture of suspects.

Uzbekistan's politics remain dominated by the aftermath of the massive demonstrations in the city of Andijon in 2005, which escalated into an uprising against the government. Violently suppressed by the military, which reportedly killed hundreds of civilians, the incident was followed by a renewed government crackdown against independent media, NGOs, human rights activists, and "untraditional" religious groups (especially Muslim, but also including Jehovah's Witnesses and Baptists). Condemned by the West for its heavy-handed response, but supported by Russia and China, Uzbekistan's government pivoted away from the West, though relations have since improved. Uzbekistan has begun to increase its military purchases from both China and the U.S.

Economic Situation:

Though among the poorest of Soviet republics, Uzbekistan did not experience an economic downturn as drastic as other successor states after the fall of the USSR, mostly due to its postponement of macroeconomic and structural reforms, as well as its continued reliance on subsidies, price controls, and exports.

After poor economic performance in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Uzbekistan saw an economic recovery after 2003, fueled largely by rising global prices for its chief commodities – gold, cotton, and natural gas. As a result, Uzbekistan’s foreign exchange reserves have doubled, and it runs a current account surplus. However, the government has failed to attract foreign investment, due to its state-owned industries, heavy regulation, gradualist approach to reform, and its interventionist, Soviet-style economic policies. Its growing population suffers from high rates of unemployment (est. 17% in 2011) and poverty (est. 4.9% in 2013). Consequently, many Uzbeks have sought opportunities abroad, particularly in Kazakhstan and Russia. The amount of foreign direct investment in Uzbekistan (est. 2014 \$1 billion) is one of the lowest in the former Soviet Union relative to economic size.

Currency: 8,075 Som = \$1
GDP: \$67.22 billion (2016)
GDP per capita: \$2110.65 (2016)
GDP Growth: 7.8% (2016)

U.S. Foreign Assistance FY 2016: \$9,777,000

In 1996, the IMF suspended aid to Uzbekistan, citing insufficient economic reform; in 2003, Uzbekistan accepted IMF requirements to make its currency fully convertible, although the government continues to impose strict currency controls. In 2004, The European Bank for Reconstruction & Development (EBRD) suspended aid to Uzbekistan in light of its human rights record and alleged corruption. The Asian Development Bank anticipated assistance of approximately \$150 million annually from 2003-2005 but has also expressed concern at the Uzbek government’s ability to achieve needed reforms.

From 2006-2008, Uzbekistan was a member of the Eurasian Economic Community, until it formally suspended its membership. In 2015, President Karimov stated that Uzbekistan will not join the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). However, Uzbekistan will continue working with the EEU on a bilateral basis. In December 2014, Uzbekistan and the EEU made a free trade agreement that would continue to allow Uzbek migrant workers visa-free access to Russia. Although Uzbekistan refuses to join the EEU, it wants to remain on good terms with its members.

Foreign Policy:

Following independence, Uzbekistan instituted itself as a leader in Central Asia through the establishment of bilateral ties and agreements with its neighbors. In 1999, Uzbekistan joined GUUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Moldova), a regional cooperation organization aimed at providing an alternative to Russian influence in the region. Uzbekistan later left the organization after a rapprochement with Russia in 2005. In 2001, Uzbekistan joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), comprised of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The SCO was created to facilitate integration and cooperation in economic and security policy among its member states and is

seen as a potential Eurasian counterweight to Euro-Atlantic institutions. Uzbekistan and China's relationship continues to strengthen as China invests in several projects in Uzbekistan.

President Karimov established close relations with the United States by offering a strategic military base near the Afghan border to the American military after 9/11. For the next four years, the United States provided substantial aid to Uzbekistan. However, in 2005, Karimov drastically downgraded ties with the United States following its criticism of his government's suppression of the Andijon anti-government demonstration. Concerned that the U.S. and EU were encouraging change in Uzbekistan similar to the so-called pro-democratic "color revolutions" in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, Karimov strengthened relations with Russia and China and ordered the U.S. to vacate the Karshi-Khanabad base.

In 2005, President Karimov and Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a bilateral security pact, the Treaty for Allied Relations. The treaty gave Karimov Russian support against perceived Western pressure against his regime and against Islamic radicals; and Putin strengthened Russian influence in Central Asia relative to the United States. Moreover, the Russian-Uzbek treaty provides for Russian military aid for Uzbekistan in the event it is attacked by a third party. Russian-Uzbek relations continue to grow, prompted by Russia's increased interest in fostering joint commercial ties.

Uzbekistan's relations with its neighbors are fraught. Ongoing disputes over water sharing and border demarcation have been aggravated by the Uzbek government's claims that Uzbek dissidents have found sanctuary in neighboring states, namely Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. These two states have refused to extradite both Uzbek refugees who fled after the 2005 Andijon event and Uzbek Islamic militants captured in their territory. However, joint operations between Uzbek and Kyrgyz security forces have reportedly killed and captured Islamic militants in southern Kyrgyzstan.

Uzbekistan is a member of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank Group, and is an observer of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and NATO's Partnership for Peace.

Relations with the U.S.:

The United States opened its embassy in Uzbekistan in early 1992, after which Uzbek-U.S. relations developed rapidly. After 9/11, American aid increased; in return, Uzbekistan offered the U.S. military the use of a key air base for operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. In 2002, President Karimov expressed full support for the American position on Iraq, and Uzbekistan emerged as a strong U.S. supporter.

Despite Congress' concern over aid to Uzbekistan, in light of its human rights record, U.S. troops continued to operate in Uzbekistan until 2005. President Karimov met with President Bush in 2002, and both leaders signed a Declaration of Strategic Partnership. After the Andijon uprising, however, the U.S. and EU demanded a formal investigation by Uzbekistan, which President Karimov rejected, precipitating a deterioration of U.S.-Uzbek relations. All U.S. troops were forced to withdraw from Uzbekistan by November 21, 2005, and bilateral relations remained strained. In recent years, however, Uzbekistan has improved its relations with the U.S., in part by agreeing to host a supply route to transport provisions for NATO coalition forces in Afghanistan.

In 2012, the U.S. restored security assistance in Uzbekistan. In 2014, the U.S. and Uzbekistan signed the 2014 Plan for Military and Military Technical Cooperation, which promises training of the Uzbekistan special forces and about \$2.8 billion in U.S. investment.

U.S.-Uzbek relations have remained mainly within the military sector, but Uzbekistan would like the U.S. to invest in their technology sector as well.

Relations with Israel:

Since their advent, Uzbek-Israeli relations have been warm; both countries maintain embassies and have exchanged ambassadors. Several bilateral agreements have been signed on investment, science, culture, education, and trade. Uzbekistan has also appealed to Israel for resources in combating terrorism, and several dozen joint ventures conduct business in Uzbekistan. Non-stop flights between Tel Aviv and Tashkent reflect the two countries' close business ties.

In March 2007, the Uzbek government and Israel's embassy in Uzbekistan celebrated the 15th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two states with a gala concert in Tashkent. Uzbekistan's Deputy Foreign Minister noted the long and peaceful coexistence of the Jewish and Uzbek peoples as well as good bilateral relations between Uzbekistan and Israel. The Israeli ambassador praised the development of bilateral cooperation between the two countries.

The countries' leaders have also exchanged state visits, most recently in 2012, when delegations headed by Pinchas Avivi and Anna Azari, the Deputy Director Generals of Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs visited Uzbekistan, and in May 2014, when First Deputy Minister Dilyor Hakimov visited Israel, and met with Minister of Foreign Affairs Avigdor Lieberman and Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelshtein.

Jewish Communal Life & Anti-Semitism:

The Bukharan Jewish community has existed in Uzbekistan for 2,000 years. The community grew with the arrival of Jewish merchants seeking trade along the Silk Road during the Roman, Persian, and Arab eras. From Antiquity and through the Middle Ages, the city of Bukhara was home to the region's primary community, from which its name derives. The Bukharan Jews benefited from the region's commercial, cultural, and scientific progress under its early Muslim rulers, though it fell into isolation and poverty alongside the rest of the region after the Mongol and Turkish conquests. Still, the Bukharan Jewish community survives into the modern era; it grew as many Ashkenazi, Mountain, and Georgian Jews fled Europe during WWII, as well as from the deportation of Jews by Soviet authorities. Today's Bukharan Jewish community is estimated at around 2,000 members; most other Uzbek Jews are of Ashkenazic heritage.

In the late 1980s, Uzbekistan's Jewish population measured 120,000. Following the fall of the Soviet Union, mass emigration to Israel, the U.S., and Germany, diminished the population. Many who left did so out of concern for growing Uzbek nationalism and the rapid revival of Islam in the region. Today, most Uzbek Jews live in Tashkent, with smaller communities existing in principal cities such as Samarkand and

Bukhara, and in the country's rural areas. The Jewish community in Tashkent enjoys positive relations with the Uzbek government, as well as with other religious and ethnic groups.

The Federation of Jewish Communities of Uzbekistan (FJC) was established in 2000 as an umbrella group encompassing the communal organizations maintained by Uzbekistan's Ashkenazi and Bukharan communities. There are five synagogues located in Tashkent, and two in Samarkand and Bukhara, respectively. Prominent businessman Lev Leviev, who serves as president of the FJC of the CIS, also heads the international Bukharan Jewish Congress.

Many Jewish institutions operate throughout Uzbekistan, providing resources and opportunities for community members to engage in Jewish life. The Tashkent Jewish Cultural Community Center (TJCCC) offers Hebrew, Yiddish, and English language classes, youth clubs, summer camps, and current affairs lectures. The TJCCC's Children and Youth Orchestra became a 2001 laureate of the International Jewish Arts Festival in Moscow. The Chief Rabbi of Central Asia continues to sponsor the TJCCC's activities, while the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) distributes aid to the Jewish community.

The Tashkent Bukharan Cultural Center also operates a museum of Jewish life. An Israeli Center in Tashkent administers Hebrew-language ulpan, youth clubs, social and cultural programs, and maintains an orchestra. There are Jewish day schools in Tashkent, Samarkand and Bukhara, as well as a yeshiva and a college for Jewish women; Jewish heritage centers operate in Samarkand and Bukhara, as well as in Tashkent. The Jewish Agency for Israel's Central Asia office is located in Tashkent, and runs a variety of programs in the country; the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs Center for International Cooperation recently organized five medical and agricultural instructions courses in Uzbekistan.

In recent years, an increasing number of Jews have left Uzbekistan in the face of rising nationalism and economic hardship. The Uzbek government does not hinder such emigration, but the homes and workplaces of Jews who plan to emigrate have been subject to burglary. Anti-Semitic incidents are uncommon, although Hizb ut-Tahrir, a fundamentalist Islamic political organization, continues to circulate strongly anti-Semitic propaganda; following the 2005 Andijon uprising, such groups distributed anti-Semitic leaflets blaming Jews as well as Israel for the Uzbek military's killing of the demonstrators and intended to defame President Karimov by claiming he was Jewish.

In 2005 and 2006, a flurry of suspicious incidents raised concerns in Uzbekistan's Jewish community. Alexei Volosevich, a Jewish journalist who had written about the government's actions in Andijon in 2005, was assaulted near his home in Tashkent; anti-Semitic slogans were found scrawled nearby. Volosevich suspected official involvement in his attack, given his investigative work and the unlikelihood of a random anti-Semitic attack in a tightly-policed area. In 2006, Avraam Yagadayev, a prominent leader in the Bukharan Jewish community of Tashkent, died after what authorities said was a hit-and-run traffic accident, although some members of the community suspected anti-Semitism and even state involvement. That same year, Grigoriy Akilov, the son of a Bukharan Jewish leader who taught at a local Jewish cultural center, was physically assaulted; and a young Jewish woman who worked as secretary to the Chief Rabbi of Central Asia was found murdered in her Tashkent home, along with her mother. Authorities investigated the incident as a simple robbery-homicide, allegedly warning the Jewish community against "politicizing" the crime.

The Uzbek government promotes tolerance in its state-formulated curricula. Its standard history textbook provides information about the Holocaust, Nazism and its anti-Semitic policies, the extermination camps, and Holocaust victims.