

# NCSEJ Country Report



## Turkmenistan



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# Table of Contents

**Executive Summary**.....2  
The unexpected death from heart failure in December 2006 of Turkmenistan’s notorious leader Saparmurat Niyazov – who had ruled for 21 years, as the country’s Soviet Community Party boss, then as its first elected president, and finally as its increasingly repressive President-For-Life – closed an unlamented chapter in Turkmenistan’s long history and opened the possibility of change. *Read more.*

**Domestic Situation**.....3  
Slightly larger than California, Turkmenistan occupies the fourth-largest territory in the former Soviet Union, although most of its land is uninhabited desert. Turkmenistan borders Iran, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and the Caspian Sea. *Read more.*

**Political Situation**.....5  
Even after his sudden demise from heart failure in late December 2006, former President Niyazov continued to dominate Turkmenistan’s politics.

**Relations with the U.S.**.....8  
U.S.-Turkmenistan bilateral relations have been cool, given former President Niyazov’s human rights record. After September 11, 2001, relations warmed as Turkmenistan assumed greater strategic significance. Turkmenistan allowed its territory to be used for humanitarian aid shipments during the war in Afghanistan, while it maintained its official neutrality by refusing to participate militarily. *Read more.*

**Relations with Israel** .....9  
Turkmenistan was the last successor state to establish diplomatic relations with Israel, in 1992. The two countries maintain both diplomatic ties and trade relations. Israeli business interests in Turkmenistan include agriculture and oil and natural gas ventures. Turkmenistan is represented in Israel with dual responsibility for Turkey. *Read more.*

**Jewish Community**.....11  
Iranian Jews began immigrating to Turkmenistan in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and have deep roots in the community, although they comprise only 20% of the current Jewish population. Ashkenazi Jews, who form the majority of the local Jewish population, immigrated to Turkmenistan during the Soviet period, especially after World War II. There is also reportedly a small Bukharan Jewish community near the border with Uzbekistan. *Read more.*

## Executive Summary

The unexpected death from heart failure in December 2006 of Turkmenistan's notorious leader Saparmurat Niyazov closed a chapter in Turkmenistan's long history and opened the possibility of change. Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov, Deputy Prime Minister since 2001, was quickly named acting president and easily won a February 2007 presidential election widely decried by foreign observers as unfree and unfair. He was re-elected in 2012.

Mostly flat desert with limited irrigation, Turkmenistan depends on the development and export of its extensive oil and natural gas reserves, which remain locked into Russian-run distribution systems. Although rising energy prices have reversed its economic ills, its economy remains largely state-run and unreformed, and is hobbled by a continued lack of diversified export routes, widespread domestic poverty, and inadequate investment in education, health care, and job creation.

Officially neutral, Turkmenistan's foreign relations have been largely determined by developments in the energy sector and by competition among Russia, China, and the West for access to its rich hydrocarbon resources. Turkmenistan's economy has suffered in the past from the failure of its CIS trading partners to pay their debts.

Turkmenistan faces serious challenges from Niyazov's highly repressive legacy of two decades, including his extensive personality cult and crushing restrictions of basic freedoms, including those of religion, assembly, association, and expression. Other challenges include inflated law enforcement and internal security apparatuses, widespread poverty, international isolation, and unresolved regional and transnational disputes, including disputed control of the Caspian Sea.

### Statistics:

**Population:** 6,120,000 (2021 est.)

**Size:** 499,100 sq. km

**Capital:** Ashgabat

**Major cities:** Ashgabat, Turkmenabat, Dashoguz, Mary, Turkmenbashi (formerly Krasnovodsk)

**Jewish population:** 700-1,200

**2009 Aliyah** (emigration to Israel): 53

**1989-2006 Aliyah:** 2,739

### Head of State and Head of Government:

**Government:** Serdar Gurbanguly

Berdymukhammedov

**Foreign Minister:** Rashid Meredov

**Ambassador to United States:** Meret Orazov

**U.S. Ambassador to Turkmenistan** Matthew S. Klimow

### Freedom House Rating:

Not free

The Jewish community of Turkmenistan is very small and unorganized. Difficult conditions have resulted in a high rate of emigration to Israel.

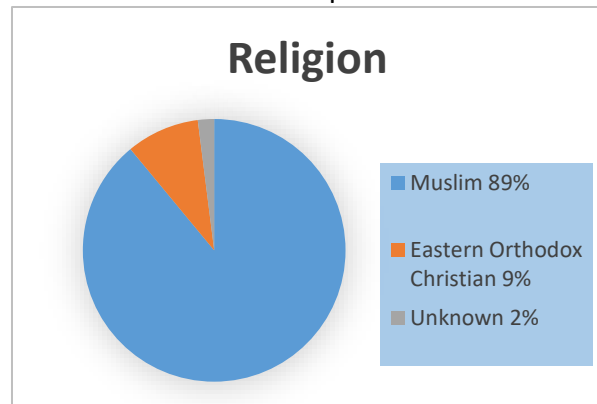
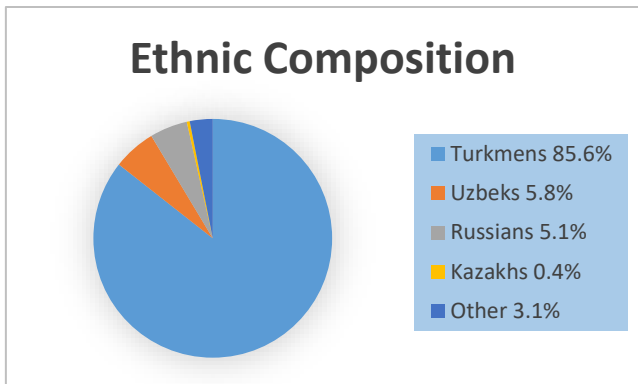
## History

Slightly larger than California, Turkmenistan occupies the fourth-largest territory in the former Soviet Union, although most of its land is uninhabited desert. Turkmenistan borders Iran, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and the Caspian Sea. Turkmenistan was previously ruled by Persian kings, Iranian tribes, successors of Alexander the Great, and Muslim Arabs. During the middle ages, the region became under Turkish rule. Later, the ancestors of today's Turkmen ethnic group established tribal khanates with strong ties to nearby Persia.

Turkmen tribes raided trade routes and fiercely opposed later Russian encroachment but failed to prevent annexation by Tsarist Russia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Defeating renewed Turkmen resistance, the Red Army occupied the area in 1920, and the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic was declared in 1924. Turkmenistan declared its sovereignty in August 1990 and its independence on October 27, 1991.

Niyazov (who, beginning in 1994, also styled himself Turkmenbashi, meaning "Father of All Turkmen") began his rule in 1985, when he was appointed Turkmen Communist Party chief. He was elected president in an unopposed election in 1990, won reelection in 1992, extended his term in 1994, and finally was made president for life by a handpicked legislature in December 1999.

At the same time, Niyazov continued to enact increasingly more bizarre edicts, including bans on opera, ballet, and all recorded music, ordering the renaming of weekdays and months of the year after himself and his mother, and making the study of the "Rukhnama" ("Book of the Soul"), a spiritual guidebook he allegedly authored, mandatory in all schools and places of worship, and required reading for state employees. Niyazov built ever more lavish monuments to himself and to his vision of Turkmenistan, spending large amounts of earnings on such projects as golden statues of himself, artificial lakes and forests, and fountains of sand. By the time he died in 2006, Niyazov was widely described as having fostered the most extreme cult of personality outside of Kim Jong Il's North Korea, which Turkmenistan mirrored in its poverty and isolation.



## Political Situation

Even after his sudden demise from heart failure in late December 2006, former President Niyazov continued to dominate Turkmenistan's politics. During his twenty-one-year rule, Saparmurat Niyazov remade Turkmenistan – in theory, a constitutional democratic republic – in his image, imposing a pervasive personality cult and a highly repressive and increasingly bizarre authoritarian regime on his isolated subjects.

Parliamentary elections held in 1999, 2003, and 2004 were considered neither free nor fair, with all candidates selected by the government and no opposition party or candidates allowed. Starting in 1994, only Niyazov's Democratic Party of Turkmenistan (DPT), the former Turkmen Communist Party, was permitted to field candidates, and all opposition groups were officially banned. Niyazov's rule was characterized by a zero-tolerance policy towards all real or suspected opposition activity, and purges of government officials who showed independent or critical views.



*The gold-domed Presidential Palace in the capital, Ashgabat, built by Niyazov*

Niyazov's latter rule was marked by increasing tensions in his regime. He survived an apparent assassination attempt in late 2002, which triggered a widespread crackdown against real and perceived critics and oppositionists, and a purge of high-level government and intelligence figures. Its culmination was a

Soviet-style show trial of the former regime officials turned oppositionists, who confessed on television and were given lengthy prison sentences despite public clamor for their execution.

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Shortly after Niyazov's death, Gurbanguly Berdimukammedov, former Health Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, was named acting president in a murky transition, which saw Parliament Speaker Ovazgeldy Ataev, the authorized presidential successor under the Turkmen constitution, suddenly removed from power on unspecified criminal charges.

After the constitution was hastily amended to allow the acting president to run for president, Berdimukammedov easily won a February 2007 election against five other government-selected candidates, in an election that foreign observers widely condemned as unfree and unfair. In a clear show

of continuity with its recent past, the government immediately announced a turnout of nearly 99%, and a win by Berdymukhammedov of nearly 90%, figures which foreign diplomats called “implausible.”

In his inaugural remarks, the new president called for continuing the course set by Niyazov, proclaiming a gradualist approach to change and rejecting the import of “foreign models of democracy,” dampening hopes of a radical break with the past. He reassured Russia, Turkmenistan’s most important economic partner, that existing contracts to supply natural gas would be honored, easing fears of a disruption in energy supplies to Russia and Europe. Although exiled oppositionists were quick to dismiss Berdymukhammedov as a tool of the Niyazov old guard, Western leaders appeared willing to encourage the new president’s public mention of reform.



*President Berdymukhammedov at his February 2007 inauguration ceremony*

Turkmenistan’s political infrastructure continues to reflect the centralized arrangements of the Niyazov era. The head of state and the head of government are combined into the same person, while the President is elected by popular vote to a five-year term. The President appoints the cabinet of ministers and serves as its chairman. The 1992 constitution provides for two unicameral legislatures, a People’s Council (Halk Maslahaty) of up to 2,500 candidates that meets yearly, and a Parliament (Mejlis) of fifty members elected to five-year terms. All candidates must be members of the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan and, in the past, had to be vetted by the President. The judicial branch is not considered independent and is appointed by the President.

No opposition parties are allowed. A special session of the People’s Council, held in late March 2007, elected President Berdymukhammedov as chairman of the Halk Maslahaty, and passed several constitutional amendments increasing presidential powers. A new constitution was approved in 2008 and it reaffirmed Turkmenistan as a “secular democracy,” and granted the president more flexible power to rule by decree.

During the 2012 presidential election, the National Revival Movement, a civic association headed by the president, nominated incumbent President Berdymukhammedov as its candidate. The Turkmen Central Election Committee announced that Berdymukhammedov won over 97% of the vote and that turnout was over 96%. The OSCE was prevented from sending a fully-staffed monitoring mission to Turkmenistan and criticized the election’s inadequate legal and political framework.

In December 2013, Turkmenistan held its first multi-party elections. Both contesting parties claimed loyalty to President Berdymukhammedov, but the ruling Democratic Party emerged as the largest faction in the Turkmen Parliament, with 47 of the 125 seats, losing its parliamentary majority for the first time since independence. The elections were criticized by the OSCE, Amnesty International, and human right groups due to a complete lack of any opposition to President Berdymukhammedov.

In January 2023, President Serdar Berdymukhammedov appointed his father Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow to the position of the chairman of the People’s Council. The People’s Council was

constructed in 2021 to become the upper house of the parliament. The members of the People's Council are not elected and are made up of high-level officials and leaders of unions and public organizations. This move gives Berdymukhamedov significant power in the government.

### **Civil and Political Liberties**

Constitutionally guaranteed freedoms are denied in practice. Political and civil liberties are severely restricted, and law enforcement corruption is rampant. There is no free press, and freedoms of association, assembly and religion are severely limited. A particularly notorious case involved Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty journalist Ogulspar Muradova, who was arrested in June 2006 and who died months later while in jail, possibly as a result of beatings she received in custody. Muradova, a veteran human rights activist, was charged with possessing ammunition, but many believe her real crime was assisting a French journalist filming a documentary on Turkmenistan and her past promotion of human rights. International media and human rights groups condemned her death as an extrajudicial killing and held Niyazov's government responsible.

### **Religious Policy**

Although a self-defined "secular democracy," Turkmenistan has severe restrictions on religion. Turkmenistan has required a minimum of 500 members for registration in any given locality, subjected religious organizations and communities to intrusive state scrutiny, dissolved minority religious organizations, demolished places of worship, greatly restricting opportunities for religious education and publishing. As a result of such restrictions, the Turkmen government initially recognized only Sunni Islam and Russian Orthodoxy.

Turkmenistan's anti-religious policy was said to reflect the personal preferences of President Niyazov himself. In 2003, Niyazov signed a law barring all unregistered religious groups from operating in Turkmenistan. Also in 2003, the ethnically Uzbek, long-serving Chief Mufti of Turkmenistan was removed and sentenced in 2004 to 22 years in prison on unspecified charges, possibly relating to the 2002 assassination attempt on Niyazov. In 2004, possibly due in part to international pressure, President Niyazov reduced the registration minimum and allowed the registration of seven other Islamic and Christian religious organizations. However, members of Protestant, Jehovah's Witness, Hare Krishna, and some Muslim organizations have all reported official persecution, as have Turkmen who had converted from Islam to other religions. President Niyazov's insistence that his book "Rukhnama" be featured prominently in places of worship alongside the Koran and the Bible, and that Muslim and Christian clerics quote liberally from it during services, was reported to be particularly offensive to many believers during the last years of his rule.

At this time, Turkmenistan has no Jewish religious organizations registered. Some observers have described Turkmenistan's current religious law as a de facto ban on Judaism, since only Christian and Islamic groups have been allowed to register to date.

Despite the absence of a state religion and the relatively low level of popular religious observance, Islam has become more associated with Turkmen national identity in recent years. Combined with the

government's policy of promoting Turkmen nationalism, this shift has created discomfort for minority groups, including Protestants, Muslim converts to other religions, and Jews.

### **Economic Situation:**

Turkmenistan possesses large oil reserves and the world's fourth-largest natural gas reserves, widely described as the key to the country's economic future and strategic significance. Although Turkmenistan's territory is mostly desert, intensive agriculture in irrigated oases has made it a leading global exporter of cotton. Like other Soviet successor states, Turkmenistan's economy sharply declined following independence, and began to recover only after the resumption of natural gas exports to Russia and Ukraine in the late 1990s. Internal reform and privatization have been largely absent from government policy, producing a struggling and inefficient state-run economy, continued problems with external debt, and very low levels of foreign investment. The state continues to control almost all industry and has largely failed to attract foreign investment in large enterprises.

According to the 2023 Index of Economic Freedom, Turkmenistan is ranked 161<sup>st</sup> out of 162 countries, and is considered a "repressed" economy. In 2022, Transparency International ranked Turkmenistan as highly corrupt, 167<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries.

In April 2006, during a state visit to Beijing, Niyazov signed a framework agreement with China for the construction of a new export pipeline eastwards to China through Uzbek and Kazakh territory. Additional pipelines to China and Iran started operations in 2010, allowing Turkmenistan to increase gas production and expand its gas export routes.

Failing to collect adequate tax revenue, the government relied on a barter system, and was dependent upon international borrowing until rising energy prices – together with multi-year supplier agreements signed with Russia in 2003 and with China in 2006 – improved its foreign exchange revenues. However, foreign observers agree that Turkmenistan's current robust growth and high foreign exchange earnings from oil and gas exports mask a largely unreformed and chronically underperforming economy that has failed to provide adequate opportunities to its people.

Turkmenistan's government successfully held a monetary reform in 2009 by introducing new national currency in order to minimize the gap between the official and unofficial exchange rate and to strengthen microeconomic policy. The New manat, with a fixed exchange rate, replaced the old manat at a ratio of 5000 old manat to one new manat.

Low energy prices since mid-2014 are hampering Turkmenistan's economic growth and reducing government revenues. The government has cut subsidies in several areas, and wage areas have increased. In January 2014, the Central Bank of Turkmenistan devalued the manat by 19%, and downward pressure on the currency continues. Turkmenistan continues to report GDP growth of

**Currency:** \$1=1.70 Manat  
(2023)

**GDP:** \$45.23 billion (2019  
est.)

**GDP per capita:** \$7,612  
(2019 est.)

**GDP Growth:** 6.3% (2019  
est.)



nearly 10% per year and claims substantial foreign currency reserves, but non-transparent data limit international institutions' ability to verify this information.

The government has shown little interest in entering into a lending arrangement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and has not accepted IMF requirements. Turkmenistan became a member of the Asian Development Bank in 2000 but has yet to receive any significant aid. The World Bank is exploring the possibility of starting a small and focused technical assistance program in Turkmenistan, at the request of the authorities. The European Union and United Nations Development Program assist with development projects. Citing a lack of political and economic reforms, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development declared in 2002 that any new investment in Turkmenistan would be dedicated to the private sector only.

## Foreign Relations

Turkmenistan under Niyazov adopted an official policy of neutrality and did not enjoy close relations with its neighbors. Its isolationist foreign policy has been largely influenced by developments in Turkmenistan's oil and gas industries and the conflict in neighboring Afghanistan. Disputes have been long running over the division of Caspian Sea resources among the five littoral states: Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, and Russia. Turkmenistan no longer participates in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) visa regime, which has made travel into and out of Turkmenistan more difficult.

Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have had particularly difficult relations due to Niyazov's accusations of Uzbek complicity in the apparent 2002 assassination attempt against him, persistent water sharing disputes between these two desert countries, and Turkmenistan's periodic persecution of its Uzbek minority, made suspect to the Niyazov regime by their relatively greater Islamic religiosity and ethnic ties to Uzbekistan.

Although the new Turkmen President has said his country will continue to adhere to its policy of neutrality, some Russian officials criticized suggested that Russia will encourage Turkmenistan to return to Moscow's sphere of influence not only economically but also politically, including urging Turkmenistan to rejoin the Commonwealth of Independent States as a full member. Currently, Turkmenistan is an associate member, downgrading its status in 2005.

### **Relations with the U.S.:**

U.S.-Turkmenistan bilateral relations have been limited, given former President Niyazov's human rights record. After September 11, 2001, relations warmed as Turkmenistan assumed greater strategic significance. Turkmenistan allowed its territory to be used for humanitarian aid shipments during the war in Afghanistan, while it maintained its official neutrality by refusing to participate militarily. Former President Niyazov pledged to support U.S. military efforts in Iraq, citing concern about Iraq's Turkmen minority.

Turkmenistan's greater cooperation may have been related to Western efforts to improve and diversify the regional infrastructure of the Caspian oilfields, and openness to proposals for new pipelines that could eventually allow Turkmenistan to break Russia's monopoly on its gas exports. Turkmenistan ultimately refused Western proposals, however, and resisted most other Western advice on restructuring its Soviet-era economy, limiting the role of the United States in its economic development.

U.S. assistance to Turkmenistan funds democracy programs, market reform programs, and security and law enforcement programs. Since 1993, the U.S. government has funded the travel of over 1,600 Turkmen citizens to the United States on academic and professional exchange programs. Some eighty Peace Corps Volunteers work throughout Turkmenistan.

In late July 2012, then-Assistant Secretary of State Robert Blake praised Turkmenistan for providing some humanitarian aid to Afghanistan and for constructing and planning energy and rail links to Afghanistan, including the prospective Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline. He stated that such projects demonstrate that Turkmenistan has a true potential to become a leader in regional economic development.

In January 2014, Turkmen President Berdymukhammedov held talks in Ashgabat with members of a visiting U.S. delegation, including U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Nisha Desai Biswal. The two sides discussed the situation in neighboring Afghanistan and construction of a Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline, as well as the status of a railroad connecting Turkmenistan with Tajikistan via Afghanistan. They also talked about deepening ties in trade, energy, agriculture, transportation, communication, and education.

On November 3, 2015, U.S. State Secretary John Kerry paid a working visit to Turkmenistan, had a meeting with President Berdymukhammedov and discussed economic cooperation, security issues in the region as well as humanitarian agenda.

In April 2023, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with Turkmenistan Foreign Minister Rashid Merdov in Washington, D.C. Secretary Blinken reemphasized the importance of the partnership between the two countries, reducing methane emissions, helping Afghan women and girls, and protecting civil rights.

### **Relations with Israel:**

Turkmenistan was the last successor state to establish diplomatic relations with Israel, in 1992. The two countries maintain both diplomatic ties and trade relations. Israeli business interests in Turkmenistan include agriculture and oil and natural gas ventures. Turkmenistan is represented in Israel with dual responsibility for Turkey.

Israel opened an embassy in Ashgabat in 2011. Turkmenistani authorities approved Shemi Tzur as Israeli non-resident ambassador after rejecting two proposed candidates. In 2011, authorities complained to Israel that they wanted "an ambassador who will deal with bilateral relations, not a spy

to collect intelligence on Iran.” Months after Ashgabat accredited the Israeli ambassador, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu met Turkmen Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov in New York during the September 2013 UN General Assembly.

In February 2014, the deputy foreign ministers of Israel and Turkmenistan held a meeting in Jerusalem to strengthen political, economic and cultural ties, and to sign a Memorandum of Cooperation between the Ministers of Foreign Affairs. In November 2014, the consultations were held between the Turkmen and Israeli foreign ministries in Ashgabat. The sides discussed aspects of cooperation in trade, health, agriculture and water resources, stressing the importance of holding joint business forums.

In April 2023, Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen visited Turkmen President Serdar Berdymukhamedov to strengthen ties between the two countries and celebrate the opening of an Israeli embassy in Ashgabat, giving Israel a vantage point to watch Iran.

## **Jewish Communal Life & Anti-Semitism**

Iranian Jews began immigrating to Turkmenistan in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and have deep roots in the community, although they comprise only 20% of the current Jewish population. Ashkenazi Jews, who form the majority of the local Jewish population, immigrated to Turkmenistan during the Soviet period, especially after World War II. There is also reportedly a small Bukharan Jewish community near the border with Uzbekistan.

The largest Jewish community is found in Ashgabat, with others in Chardzhou, Dashoguz, Turkmenbashi, Balkanabat, Turkmenabat, Kerki, and Mary. The community continues to shrink due to steady aliyah and economic migration and is now estimated to number less than half of the 2,500 Jews listed as living in Turkmenistan in the 1989 Soviet census.

There is no organized Jewish community, synagogue, or rabbi, although local Jews gather informally for religious observances. It is the only FSU state without an officially registered Jewish community. The only synagogue in Turkmenistan was converted into a gymnasium during the Soviet era and has not been restored to its original function. There have been no recent reports of anti-Semitic incidents or harassment.

The American Jewish Distribution Committee and the Jewish Agency for Israel have offices in Turkmenistan. The Jewish community’s elderly receive intermittent charity and medical help, sent from abroad and distributed by a handful of unofficial local volunteers and activists.

In January 2023, the United Nations in Turkmenistan and the Embassy of Israel honored the lives of Turkmen Jews who died in the Holocaust.

Turkmenistan has cracked down further on freedom of speech and religious freedom. Government officials have been increasingly spreading propaganda against civil society leaders, using explicit anti-

Semitic images. Turkmenistan Civic Solidarity Group has asked OSCE members to get involved to stop this from continuing.