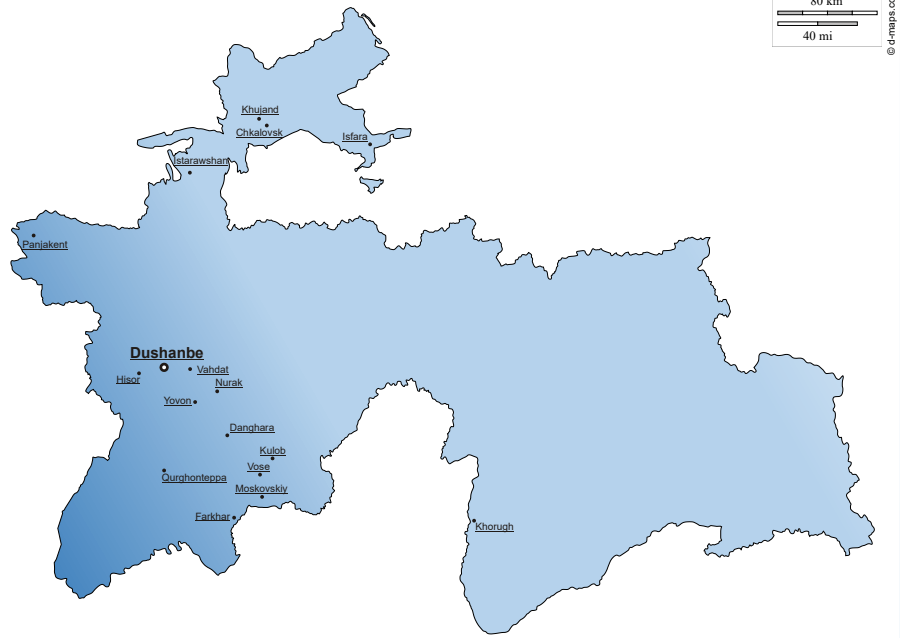


NCSEJ Country Report



Republic of Tajikistan



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Executive Summary

Remote, mountainous Tajikistan has had perhaps the most difficult transition to independent statehood of all the former Soviet republics. Already the poorest of the Soviet successor states, it suffered a bitter five-year civil war, fought shortly after its 1991 independence. This war left the country politically and ethnically divided, devastated its underdeveloped economy, and impoverished its population. Although the central government has recovered most of its authority, it has not been able to end the transit of drugs and guns through its territory. Recruitment and propaganda efforts and attacks by radical Islamist groups in the region, and their reported alliance with regional narco-trafficking networks, continue to challenge Tajikistan's government. The government has been confronted with the inflow of foreign jihadists fleeing repression by neighboring states in recent years, and the growth of its own domestic radical Islamist movement.

Tajikistan's closest ties are with Russia, whose troops guarded the troubled Tajik-Afghan border until mid-2005, and which maintains a permanent military presence in Tajikistan. Relations with neighboring states are improving but remain complicated by cross-border security issues and disputes over border delineation and energy supplies. The human rights situation in Tajikistan is considered poor, though religious freedom is generally respected. Tajikistan continues to receive significant international assistance, including from the United States.

Bukharan Jews have lived in Tajikistan for over 1,000 years. They were joined by a small Ashkenazi community following World War II. Mass emigration has reduced the Jewish population to a small, largely elderly group centered on the capital Dushanbe. Ongoing government attempts since 2003 to destroy the last remaining synagogue in Dushanbe in order to expand the presidential palace, and two firebomb and arson attacks on the

Statistics:

Population: 9,750,000 (July 2021 est.)

Size: 143,100 sq. km

Capital: Dushanbe

Major cities: Dushanbe, Kalininabad, Khudzhand, Kulyah

Jewish population: 100-350 (est.)

2009 Aliyah: 20

Head of State: President Emomali Rahmon

Head of Government: Prime Minister Kokhir Rasulzoda

Foreign Minister: Sirojiddin Muhridin

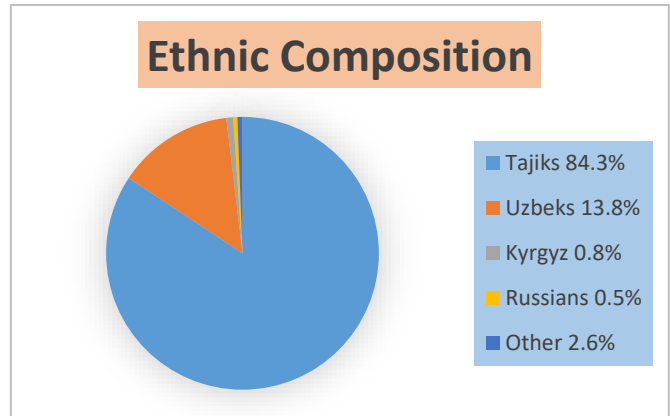
Ambassador to United States: Farhod Salim

U.S. Ambassador to Tajikistan: Manuel P. Micaller Jr.

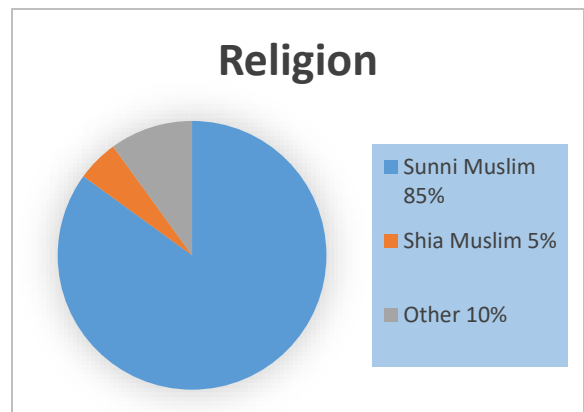
synagogue in 2006 have raised foreign concerns over the fate of the country's shrinking Jewish community.

History

Tajikistan is a landlocked, mountainous country that is slightly smaller than Wisconsin, bordering Afghanistan, China, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. An ancient Eastern Iranian people with Persian, Mongol, and Turkish heritage, the Tajiks once dominated much of Central Asia, founding the famous cities Bukhara and Samarkand in modern-day Uzbekistan. Conquered by the Arabs, Persians, and Mongols alternately, Tajikistan eventually came under Russian control in the later 19th century, to great Tajik opposition. Soviet-era demarcation of Tajikistan's current borders in the 1920s lent a superficial cohesion to an ethnically diverse populace, which included large Uzbek and Russian minorities, and planted the seeds of post-Soviet ethnic strife. Left largely underdeveloped by Soviet authorities, Tajikistan saw renewed Islamic and nationalist movements rise in the 1970s and 1980s and declared its independence on September 9, 1991.



Among the fifteen former Soviet republics, Tajikistan has perhaps experienced the most difficult transition to independent statehood. It is the poorest of the Soviet successor states, and is still recovering from a bitter civil war. The war, fought shortly after its 1991 independence, left the country politically and ethnically divided, devastated its underdeveloped economy, and impoverished its population. Although the central government has recovered most of its authority, it has failed to end the transit of drugs and arms through its territory. Attacks and recruitment by radical Islamist groups and narco-traffickers in the region continue to challenge the Tajik government, which has been threatened by an inflow of foreign jihadists from neighboring states, and a strengthening of Tajikistan's own radical Islamists.



Tajikistan's closest ties are with Russia, whose troops guarded the troubled Tajik-Afghan border until mid-2005. Relations with neighboring states are improving but remain complicated by security issues and disputes over border delineation and energy supplies. The human rights situation in Tajikistan is considered poor, though religious freedom is generally respected. Tajikistan continues to receive significant international assistance, including from the United States.

Bukharan Jews have lived in Tajikistan for over 1,000 years. They were joined by a small Ashkenazi community following World War II, but mass emigration has reduced the Jewish population to a small, largely elderly group concentrated in the capital Dushanbe. The government's decision to raze the last (and historic) synagogue in Dushanbe in order to expand the presidential palace has raised foreign concerns over the fate of the country's shrinking Jewish community.

Political Situation

Tajikistan's 1994 Constitution provides for an elected government with executive, legislative, and judicial branches. As with its neighbors, Tajikistan concentrates power with the President, who serves as Chairman of the Parliament and possesses wide discretion in appointing and dismissing officials, including the Prime Minister, cabinet, and Supreme Court justices. After multiple questionable elections since 1994 and a dubious referendum to extend presidential term length, President Emomali Rahmon was re-elected for the fifth time in 2020.

Indeed, none of Tajikistan's presidential or parliamentary elections have been deemed free and fair by foreign observers. Analysts have noted the recent rise in marginalization of the opposition, led by the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRP), which accuses President Rahmon and his government of instituting repressive measures against them, citing the arrest and imprisonment of senior opposition leaders, and shrinking numbers of opposition and independent members in parliament. However, most observers note the peaceful nature of Tajikistan's elections, despite their flawed character. Many also note the genuine public support enjoyed by President Rahmon, who, despite his growing intolerance of dissent, is credited by many Tajikistanis with helping to end civil war and restoring economic growth.

After its independence, Tajikistan slid into a power struggle and then bitter civil war (1992-97) between Russian-backed, ex-Communist, ruling elites known as the Popular Front, and a loose coalition of pro-democratic, Islamist, and historically disenfranchised minority forces under the banner of the United Tajik Opposition (UTO), which was supported nominally by Iran and various Afghan factions. Most of these factions represented regional, clan, or ethnic loyalties in response to the collapse of central authority. Prolonged fighting claimed tens of thousands of lives, and ethnic cleansing, largely perpetrated by the Popular Front, generated large numbers of refugees, including many non-ethnic Tajiks, such as Russians and Jews.

The UTO initially succeeded in capturing Dushanbe and ousting Tajikistan's old-guard President Rakhmon Nabiyev in September 1992. However, military aid and assistance from Russia and Uzbekistan – concerned by the prospect of neighboring anti-Russian, pro-Islamic, nationalist regime – aided the Popular Front in retaking the capital. A new, pro-Moscow government was formed in 1992 under the leadership of old-guard apparatchik Emomali Rahmon (known as Imomali Rakhmonov before March 2007). During a period of heavy fighting in 1992 and 1993, pro-government forces defeated the opposition and launched ethnic cleansing campaigns against minority groups that had supported the UTO.

The remaining Tajik opposition regrouped in Afghanistan; UTO fighters returned periodically to Tajikistan to fight government forces in the mid-1990s. As the conflict dragged on, some UTO factions became aligned with regional Islamist groups, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and various Afghan factions. Russian troops in the country also fought in the war. In 1995, a UN Observer Mission was deployed, and a 1996 UN-brokered armistice established a power-sharing peace accord between the government and the UTO, ending the war by mid-1997. It is estimated that the civil war resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of people, and the creation of hundreds of thousands of refugees.

In 2000, implementation of the peace accords precipitated multi-party parliamentary elections, giving a minority vote to opposition and independent candidates, and a majority to the President's ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP). After the election, the reconciliation process formally ended, and the UN observer mission withdrew.

High levels of corruption in the judiciary and law enforcement continue to compromise public security and the rule of law. Networks of criminal clan-aligned factions compete to control markets and narco-trafficking, and terrorism also remains a major threat. Militants aligned with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan continue to operate in the country despite vigorous counterterrorism efforts by security forces. Reports suggest that Afghan and Kyrgyz Islamic militants continue to seek refuge in Tajikistan, establishing strong connections with similar cross-border networks in the region in order to traffic Afghan narcotics through Tajikistan to Europe.

Economic Situation

Tajikistan is the poorest of the Soviet successor states and continues to recover from the economic devastation caused by its civil war and declining demand for its products following independence. The Tajik economy – never heavily developed under Communism – remains largely agricultural, with limited arable land, and a nominal industrial sector. Unable to afford imported energy, Tajikistan relies on hydropower for 98.8% of its electricity. The limited capacity for water and inefficient manufacturing creates periodic electricity shortages. Although economic growth accelerated after 2002, its macroeconomic architecture remains fragile and vulnerable to fluctuations in global prices of aluminum and cotton, its chief commodity exports.

An estimated 35.6% of Tajiks live below the poverty line, and unemployment and underemployment are estimated around 40%; intermittent shortages of electricity and clean water continue to impair the standard of living. Foreign trade is also very limited; Tajikistan's principal partners are Uzbekistan, Russia, Turkey, Iran, certain EU and CIS states. Indeed, Tajikistan remains dependent on foreign aid from Russia, Uzbekistan, the U.S., and the international community to supplement its basic needs. Its infrastructure and health and education systems are largely underdeveloped and ineffective. Rates of domestic drug

Currency: \$1=11.10 Somoni
GDP: \$8.75 billion (2021)
GDP per capita: \$897 billion
(2021 est.)
GDP Growth: 9.2 % (2021 est.)

use, corruption, organized crime, arms smuggling, and HIV/AIDS continues to plague Tajikistan as a result of its long and unstable border with Afghanistan.

Foreign Relations

Tajikistan's strategic location and weak government continue to attract the attention of its neighbors. Tajikistan's most important ally is Russia; Tajikistan continues to receive Russian military assistance, particularly in its counter-narcotics efforts; Russia has also forgiven massive Tajik debts, and Tajikistan in turn has welcomed Russian investment in key infrastructure projects. Tajikistan is a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a regional group including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, China, Russia, and Uzbekistan. Border disputes continue between Tajikistan and its neighbors; Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have accused the Tajik government of tolerating the presence of Islamist training camps on its territory.

Tajikistan and Uzbekistan's relationship continue to be tense as Tajikistan pushes for the Rogun dam project. Tajikistan insists the dam will advance the country's hydropower development and overall economy, but Uzbekistan and other neighboring nations are concerned with the potentially fatal effects the dam will have on their agricultural sectors. Uzbekistan in particular has voiced strong objections to the project, threatening to use force to prevent the dam's construction.

However, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan engaged in some displays of positive diplomacy, with Uzbekistan's president Islam Karimov's visit to Dushanbe for a Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in late 2014. Direct flights between Dushanbe and Tashkent reopened in March 2015. The two countries are also in talks to strengthen their mutual border to combat increasing cross-border extremism.

In May 2007, Tajikistan and Iran signed a "protocol on military and technical cooperation" during an official visit by the Iranian Defense Minister. President Rahmon met with the Iranian minister and touted Tajik-Iranian bilateral economic ties, emphasizing Iran's investment in the construction of a transportation tunnel and a hydropower plant in Tajikistan. In addition, Iran has provided over \$6 million in direct military assistance and training to Tajikistan's military since the 1990s.

Relations with the United States:

U.S.-Tajik relations have warmed measurably since September 11, 2001, and Tajikistan has been a strong supporter of American efforts to promote peace and stability in Afghanistan. The U.S. has maintained an embassy in Dushanbe since 1992; in 2003, Tajikistan opened its first embassy in Washington, D.C. and sent its first ambassador. Tajikistan also allowed U.S. forces to coordinate humanitarian assistance operations and airlift control on its soil during the War in Afghanistan. Conversely, Tajikistan opposed U.S. military actions in Iraq, arguing instead for instead peaceful, diplomatic negotiations to create democratic change.

The U.S. government has funded a bridge linking Tajikistan and Afghanistan, as well as various programs promoting democracy, market reform, security and law enforcement development, and humanitarian aid. Since 2005, U.S. assistance has focused on improving Tajikistan's border defense after Russia gave up responsibility for securing the Tajik-Afghan border. In 2010, the U.S. and Tajikistan launched an annual bilateral consultation process to enhance cooperation. In late 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton traveled to Tajikistan; in 2012, Tajikistan's Minister of Foreign Affairs Hamrokhon Zarifi met with the Secretary to discuss the situation Afghanistan, border security, drug trafficking, and terrorism.

In November 2015, the President of Tajikistan Rahmon met the U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry in Dushanbe. They discussed issues related to the multilateral cooperation between the two countries.

In February 2023, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with Tajikistan Foreign Minister Sirojiddin Muhridin in Astana, Kazakhstan. Blinken emphasized his commitment to bilateral cooperation with Tajikistan and their shared goal of protecting women and girls in Afghanistan. They also discussed opportunities for economic development and security.

Relations with Israel

Israel and Tajikistan maintain full diplomatic relations, and Israel is represented by its ambassador in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. The two countries diplomatic efforts started on March 26, 1992, after Israel recognized the independence of the Republic the previous year.

In 2013, the Republic of Tajikistan and Israel signed a memorandum of understanding agreed to hold bilateral consultations between their Ministries of Foreign Affairs.

In June 2016, the Chairman of the Israel-Tajikistan Inter-Parliamentary Friendship Group Sharren Haskel and State Duma Knesset member Joseph Yona met. Together, they talked to the Chairman of the Majlisi Namoyandagon (Assembly of Representatives) of the Majlisi Oli (Supreme Assembly) of the Republic of Tajikistan, the Chairman of the Tajik-Israeli Parliamentary Friendship Group as well as the Deputy Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Agriculture, Defense and Labor, and Migration and Employment.

In April 2022, Tajik Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Muzaffar Huseinzoda and Israeli Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Simona Halperin met in Dushanbe. The pair discussed opportunities in the economy, sciences, energy, agriculture, and tourism. They also looked for ways to strengthen their partnership within the international community.

Jewish Communal Life and Anti-Semitism:

The small Jewish community in Tajikistan is comprised of Bukharan and Ashkenazi Jews. The Bukharan Jews have a long history in Central Asia, while Ashkenazi Jews arrived during in the region during World War II. After Tajikistan's independence in 1992, many Jews, especially Russian-speaking Ashkenazim, emigrated to escape the country's civil war, the economic collapse, and threats against non-natives. In 1992, Israel conducted a successful airlift operation to bring immigrants from Tajikistan to Israel. The

Jewish community's numbers have never recovered from the emigration of 10,000 Jews since 1989; the population is now estimated to be no more than several hundred Jews (most of them elderly) living primarily in Dushanbe. Religious services have been described as faltering.

Neither official nor popular anti-Semitism has been apparent in past years, despite significant activity by radical Islamists in the region. In 2006, however, two firebomb and arson attacks on the Dushanbe synagogue occurred, raising concerns over the fate of the country's shrinking Jewish community. Following these incidents, the Chief Rabbi of Central Asia for Chabad-Lubavitch told the press that the Tajik authorities refused to provide protection for the synagogue and were asking the community to pay for security, which it could not afford. Furthermore, in 2008, the government razed the last remaining synagogue in Dushanbe in order to build a grand presidential palace, destroying the synagogue's mikvah, kosher butcher shop, and several classrooms. Despite international protests from UNESCO, various Jewish organizations, and the U.S. government, the historic synagogue was completely demolished. The New Dushanbe Synagogue was opened in May 2009 in an existing building donated to the Jewish community by a Tajik businessman.