



Turkmenistan



Source: Graphic created by Hannah Fischer at CRS.

Political Background

Government: Turkmenistan defines itself as a secular democracy, but in practice political power is concentrated with President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov. The U.S. Department of State describes the country's government as "authoritarian." Turkmenistan's legislature (the Mejlis) routinely supports presidential decrees and rarely displays legislative independence.

History: Turkic language-speaking tribes have inhabited the eastern Caspian region for centuries. In the mid-1800s, the area was invaded by Russia, and it later became a Soviet republic. The country gained independence in 1991, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the former head of the Turkmen Communist Party, Saparmurad Niyazov, was elected president in an uncontested race. A referendum held in 1994 extended his term until 2002. In 1999, amendments to the constitution proclaimed him president for life. Niyazov, known as the "Father of the Turkmen," was an autocrat. He cultivated a cult of personality and suppressed dissent.

Contemporary Period: President Niyazov died unexpectedly in 2006. He was replaced in 2007 by Berdymukhamedov, a longtime politician and former dentist. Berdymukhamedov implemented modest reforms during his first term in office. In 2012, he won a second term after reportedly clinching 97.7% of the vote. Electoral observers say that Berdymukhamedov ran uncontested, and many suggest he is building a cult of personality.

Political Freedom: In September 2017, the legislature ratified a new constitution that effectively allows President Berdymukhamedov to serve indefinitely. Presidential term limits were extended from 5 to 7 years, and the 70-year age cap for presidential candidates was removed. Some experts argue that these reforms will entrench Berdymukhamedov's power, making future political reforms unlikely. Although the constitution grants Turkmen citizens the right to choose their government through periodic elections, Turkmenistan

has never held competitive elections. Changes in 2012 that expanded the number of political parties did little to improve the political landscape, according to observers. The Turkmen government does not recognize opposition parties and persecutes dissident politicians.

Human Rights: Turkmenistan ranks as one of the most repressive and isolated countries in the world, according to several human rights organizations such as Freedom House and Amnesty International. Although the country adopted a National Human Rights Action Plan in April 2017, activists say that basic civil liberties are still not recognized. The government persecutes religious and ethnic minorities, independent journalists, political dissidents, and people who engage in homosexual acts. Also, sexual intercourse between men is illegal under the criminal code. Activists, citing protections listed in the constitution, argue that Turkmen leaders lack the political will and capacity to ensure citizens are protected against arbitrary punishment. Turkmenistan received the lowest possible ranking (Tier 3) in the State Department's 2017 Trafficking in Persons report.

Turkmenistan at a Glance

Land area: 188,457 sq. mi.; slightly larger than California
Population: 5.66 million
Ethnicity: 85% Turkmen, 5% Uzbek, 4% Russian, and others
Religion: Muslim 89%, Eastern Orthodox 9%, Other 2%
GDP (2016): \$36.18 billion; per capita GNI is \$16,060 at PPP
Political Leaders: President and Prime Minister: Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, Chairman of the Mejlis (legislature): Akja Nurberdiyewa

Data from World Bank

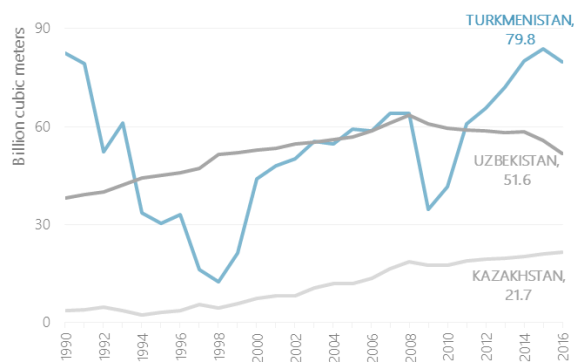
Terrorism and Drug Trafficking: According to the State Department, Turkmenistan did not report any terrorist incidents in 2016, but the Turkmen government, nevertheless, "continued to maintain pervasive surveillance of the population." The government closely monitors the country's Muslim population, and the country's government has imprisoned Muslims who espouse alternative interpretations of Islam. The country has participated in international training initiatives hosted by agencies such as the U.N. Regional Center for Preventive Diplomacy in Central Asia and the U.N. Office of Drugs and Crime. Corruption, however, hampers the country's law-enforcement efforts. Turkmenistan is not a major producer of drugs, but it is a transshipment point for Afghan opiates going to Turkey, Russia, and Europe. In 2016, President Berdymukhamedov reportedly directed government bodies to "redouble" their efforts to stop the illicit drug trade in the country. Turkmenistan has participated in U.S.-led counternarcotics trainings, including one for drug unit commanders in May 2016.

Economy

Key Sectors: Turkmenistan's top exports are cotton, oil, and natural gas. According to estimates, Turkmenistan has the sixth-largest natural gas reserves in the world. In recent years, the government has heavily invested in exploration and infrastructure projects to service its state-run gas industry, Turkmengaz. According to the *Economist Intelligence Unit*, government revenue has been "negatively affected" by low energy prices and the lack of major buyers for Turkmen natural gas. Other factors hurting the economy include debt repayments and currency depreciation. The government also ended popular electricity, gas and water subsidies in June 2017. Given the country's recent economic struggles, an IMF official said the organization "stands ready to support the government's reforms through policy advice and capacity building."

Gas Exports: In April 2017, Gazprom, a Russian gas company, confirmed it would no longer import Turkmen gas over a 2015 price dispute. Turkmenistan also suspended gas supplies to Iran earlier in 2017 over a contract disagreement. As a result, Turkmenistan is largely isolated from its neighbors, and it has become increasingly reliant on gas sales to China, its only significant customer. According to some observers, in the future, there could be a price war between Turkmenistan and its Central Asian neighbors to supply gas to China as gas prices continue to fall. China has been the top destination for Turkmen gas exports since 2011. Exports peaked in 2014 when \$9.4 billion worth of pipeline gas was sent to China (which received about 99% of Turkmen gas exports). In 2015, gas exports declined by \$1.7 billion, with \$7.7 billion sent to China (or about 96% of total Turkmen gas exports).

Figure 1. Marketed Natural Gas Production, 1990-2016



Source: Cedigaz

Pipelines: China's State-owned China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) has major investments in Turkmen gas fields. Gas currently is transported to China via three pipelines. A fourth line, originally scheduled to become operational by 2016, has been postponed as of March 2017. Demand and falling energy prices could be to blame, but another reason could be Turkmengaz's inability to repay

debts. During President Berdimukhamedov's visit to China in November 2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping called Turkmenistan a "long-standing and reliable strategic partner in the energy sector," according to Chinese state media.

Future Energy Development: The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline and the development of India as an export market would be an important breakthrough for Turkmenistan, helping it to achieve its ambitious energy production and export goals. Despite the security and governance challenges in the region, the \$10 billion pipeline project is moving forward. Construction of the Turkmen section of TAPI began in December 2015, and Afghanistan finalized an engineering design for its part of the pipeline. Also, Pakistan began surveying work in early 2017. It is uncertain whether the pipeline will actually be completed, but some estimate the project will be finished by the end of 2019. Some political and business groups in Europe remain interested in a Trans-Caspian gas pipeline that would carry Turkmen gas to the European Union. Yet, several challenges, such as costs and the undefined legal status of the Caspian Sea bed, have prevented the project from being implemented.

Figure 2. The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Pipeline



Notes: The Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) pipeline is also shown. Source: Oil & Gas Journal

U.S.-Turkmenistan Relations

Afghanistan: In the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, Turkmenistan offered over-flight and other assistance to U.S.-led operations in Afghanistan. In early 2016, then CENTCOM Commander General Lloyd Austin said that, while Turkmenistan had been reluctant to participate in U.S. military cooperation programs, the two countries had cooperated "on counter-narcotics, disaster preparedness, and medical service readiness." The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan border has continued to be the site of violence in recent years, and the Taliban reportedly have a presence in Turkmenistan's border area.

U.S. Foreign Assistance: In FY2016, the United States provided Turkmenistan with \$4.3 million in aid. For FY2018, the Trump Administration requested \$430,000 in foreign assistance for Turkmenistan. The largest share of the request falls under the Nonproliferation, Anti-terrorism, Demining, and Related Programs account (NADR, \$230,000). The remaining sum falls under the International Military Education and Training account (IMET, \$200,000).

Wil Mackey, Research Assistant
Jennifer M. Roscoe, Research Assistant

Edward Y. Gracia, Research Assistant

IF10303

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.