



Uzbekistan



Source: Graphic created by Hannah Fischer at CRS.

Political Background

Government: Uzbekistan is a landlocked country in Central Asia that shares long borders with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Previously a republic of the Soviet Union, Uzbekistan gained independence in 1991. Uzbekistan’s government consists of a bicameral legislature (Oliy Majlis) headed by a prime minister, a Supreme Court, and an executive branch led by a term-limited president (two five-year terms). The government’s centralized structure grants the executive branch extensive powers, and the president appoints all cabinet ministers, regional governors, and judges. Meaningful political debate is absent in the legislature, which is controlled by pro-government parties.

Leadership Transition: Uzbekistan’s longtime leader, Islam Karimov, died in 2016, leading many to speculate about the prospects for significant policy reforms. Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the country’s former Prime Minister, succeeded Karimov as President. Mirziyoyev has presided over an ambitious reform agenda that challenges Karimov’s legacy. He has reestablished diplomatic ties with neighboring countries and deepened economic cooperation with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. He also deepened relations with Russia, China, and the United States and signed multi-billion dollar investment agreements with companies from all three countries. Domestically, Mirziyoyev has ordered the release of some political prisoners and demanded the removal of thousands of citizens from security service blacklists.

Demography: With a population of about 32.4 million, Uzbekistan is the most populous country among the five Central Asian states. Uzbeks are the predominant ethnic group (80%), and Uzbek is the official state language. Russian, however, is also used for day-to-day business interactions. Muslims—many of whom are Sunnis—account for 88% of the Uzbek population, while Orthodox Christians account for 9%.

Human Rights

Basic freedoms: Under former President Karimov, Uzbekistan was one of the most repressive countries in the world. Rights activists often drew comparisons with North Korea to characterize conditions in the country. Human rights activists criticized Uzbekistan for its use of mandatory manual labor. The country annually forced millions of people—including students, teachers, public- and private-sector employees, and sometimes children—to harvest cotton, the country’s main cash crop, on state-owned fields.

The country’s reputation has started to change. Since September 2016, some 30 political prisoners have been released, and Mirziyoyev issued a decree banning courts from using evidence acquired through torture. His regime also appears to have stopped—or at least limited—the use of forced labor. In September 2017, Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov relieved students, education and health workers from picking cotton. Still, Freedom House, a U.S.-based human rights NGO, continues to classify Uzbekistan as “not free,” citing corruption, torture, media censorship, and the suppression of political opponents as key concerns.

Religion: The Uzbek state strictly controls and monitors religious practices, due in part to long-standing security concerns about the spread of Islamic extremism from neighboring Afghanistan and Pakistan. Some have argued that Uzbekistan’s anti-extremist laws are used to suppress the political opposition. The State Department has designated Uzbekistan as a “Country of Particular Concern” for its violations of human rights, including freedom of religion.

Uzbekistan at a Glance

Area and Population: Land area is 425,400 square km., slightly larger than California
Population: Approximately 32.4 million (2017)
Capital: Tashkent
Ethnic groups: Uzbek 80%, Russian 5.5%, Tajik 5%, Kazakh 3%, Karakalpak 2.5%, Tatar 1.5%, and other 2.5%
Language: Uzbek (official) 74.3%, Russian 14.2%, Tajik 4.4%, and other 7.1%
GDP: \$48.7 billion (2017)

Data from World Bank and CIA World Factbook

Regional and Security Issues

Foreign relations: Historically, Uzbekistan has prioritized its sovereignty, and has had tense relations with many of its neighbors, specifically over water rights and border delineations. It has been reluctant to involve itself in regional integration efforts, particularly those led by foreign states, such as Russia. Uzbekistan, however, joined the

China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) at its founding in 2001, and signed strategic-partnership treaties with Russia and China in 2012. Uzbekistan has developed a strong relationship with China, and has received funding for infrastructure projects as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative. Mirziyoyev also has worked to reduce tensions and to increase trade between Uzbekistan and the other Central Asian states.

Terrorism and Drug Trafficking: About 1,500 Uzbek nationals have travelled to Syria and Iraq to fight with the Islamic State (IS). Uzbek authorities are worried about returning fighters and regional terrorist groups, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan—which declared allegiance to IS in 2015—and its offshoot, Islamic Jihad Union. Terrorist attacks in Uzbekistan are rare because the authoritarian government's strict control of religious practices has largely stifled the emergence of extremist forces within the country. Nevertheless, in 2004 and 2015, the U.S. Embassy in Tashkent, the Uzbek capital, was attacked. Also, several Uzbek nationals have been involved in terrorist attacks abroad, including in October 2017 when an Uzbek national killed eight people in New York.

Uzbekistan shares a border with Afghanistan, which reportedly produces around 90% of the world's opium supply. According to Interpol, about 60% of Afghan opium exports travel through Uzbek territory. Yet, in 2017, Uzbek authorities seized only two tons of narcotics, even though hundreds—and perhaps thousands—of tons passed through the country.

Environmental Issues: Uzbekistan faces significant environmental challenges, including the near disappearance of the Aral Sea, which previously was one of the largest lakes in the world and a source of irrigation for the country's cotton industry. Uzbekistan relies on water from rivers flowing through Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and in 2012, Karimov said long-running water disputes between Uzbekistan and its neighbors could result in a regional war. In 2018, Mirziyoyev dropped objections to Tajikistan's plan to build the Rogun Dam, which had been a major source of contention between the two countries.

Economy

Resources: Major Uzbek industries include cotton, uranium, gold, and natural gas. Uzbekistan is one of the few Eurasian countries that is energy-independent and a net exporter of energy resources. However, the entire energy sector is monopolized by the government and faces difficult tradeoffs between satisfying large domestic energy needs and meeting the requirements of pre-existing international export agreements. Natural gas and electricity account for up to 25% of total Uzbek exports. Uzbekistan is Central Asia's largest producer of electricity and a net exporter. The country generates 1.7% of the world's natural gas production, ranking 13th in global production behind Turkmenistan. Uzbekistan is the world's 7th largest uranium supplier and is increasing production. Uzbekistan's uranium is exported mostly to China with significant amounts sold to South Korea as well. The country is also the 11th largest producer of gold.

Liberalization: Recent economic slowdowns in China and Russia, Uzbekistan's main economic partners, have hurt Uzbek trade and investment and worsened its foreign currency shortage. However, real GDP grew by 5.3% in 2017, largely due to modest economic recoveries in Russia and Kazakhstan. President Mirziyoyev has pursued economic reforms, including currency liberalization, relaxation of capital controls, and improved trade relations with other Central Asian countries, which were strained under the previous administration. According to the Ministry of Foreign Trade, preliminary results of the new open trade policy have been favorable. Exports to Kazakhstan rose by 48% in the first half of 2018, and trade turnover between Uzbekistan and the other four Central Asian countries increased by 46% compared to 2017 over the same time period.

U.S. Relations

Afghanistan: Uzbekistan has cooperated with the United States in supporting the war effort in Afghanistan since 2001, and reportedly is concerned that a U.S. drawdown in Afghanistan may lead to increased regional instability. According to some, these concerns prompted Mirziyoyev to agree to a five-year military cooperation plan with the United States in 2018 despite periodic tension in the relationship over U.S. criticism of Uzbekistan's human rights record. In 2005, for example, the United States criticized the country's security forces for killing hundreds of protestors in an eastern Uzbek city, reportedly irking the Uzbek government and prompting it to ask U.S. forces to vacate the Khanabad airbase, which had been used to support operations in Afghanistan. In the late 2000s, relations improved, and the United States struck a series of agreements with Uzbekistan, including one to allow the transport of non-lethal supplies through the country. In March 2018, the Uzbek government hosted international peace talks on Afghanistan. Several months later, in May 2018, Mirziyoyev visited Washington, DC, where he met with President Donald Trump. It was the first official visit by an Uzbek President to the United States since 2002. The two sides agreed to business deals potentially worth about \$5 billion.

U.S. Foreign Assistance: In FY2017, the United States provided \$18.8 million in assistance to Uzbekistan. For FY2019, the Trump Administration requested \$10.6 million for the country. About \$7 million was for the Economic Support and Development Fund, and \$2.8 million was for USAID Global Health Programs. Smaller amounts were requested for Nonproliferation, Anti-Terrorism, Demining and Related Programs (\$540,000) and International Military Education and Training (\$300,000).

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