



# Uzbekistan

## Overview

Uzbekistan is a landlocked country in Central Asia that became independent with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Because it has the largest population in the region and is the only country that borders all four other Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan), many analysts see Uzbekistan as a potential regional leader. The country also shares a border with Afghanistan. U.S. policymakers have identified Uzbekistan as a key partner in addressing regional threats such as illegal narcotics, terrorism, and violent extremism. Since Uzbekistan embarked on a wide-ranging reform program in 2016, the country has reengaged with the international community, leading to significantly improved relations with the United States. The U.S. government has praised Uzbekistan's ongoing reform efforts, but continues to raise concerns about human rights and political freedoms. Some Members of Congress express interest in expanding U.S. engagement with Uzbekistan on trade, democratic reforms, human rights, and security cooperation.

## Political Background

**Leadership Transition.** From 1991 to 2016, Uzbekistan was led by President Islam Karimov, a former high-level Soviet official. International observers considered his rule authoritarian and highly repressive. After his death, Karimov was succeeded by Shavkat Mirziyoyev, an experienced politician who was prime minister under Karimov for 13 years. Mirziyoyev embarked on an ambitious reform program, aiming to transform Uzbekistan by modernizing and liberalizing the economy, addressing human rights concerns, and reengaging with the international community. He won reelection to a second five-year term in October 2021. Observers from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) noted "significant procedural irregularities" and concluded that Uzbekistan's reforms "have not yet resulted in a genuinely pluralistic environment."

**Government.** Uzbekistan's centralized government structure grants the executive branch extensive powers, with the president exercising a significant degree of control over the legislature and the judiciary. By law, the president is limited to two terms, but this limit was not observed by Karimov. The bicameral legislature (*Oliy Majlis*) has historically provided neither an effective check on the executive nor a venue for genuine political debate, although its role has expanded somewhat under Mirziyoyev, who has urged greater initiative from Parliament. In 2020, legislative amendments expanded parliamentary oversight powers.

**Proposed Constitutional Reforms.** Following his reelection, Mirziyoyev raised the possibility of constitutional changes, a move some analysts see as a

potential means of evading the two-term limit on the presidency. When a new draft constitution was published for public comment in June 2022, officials presented the proposed changes as intended to further democratization and bolster human rights. Some of the proposed provisions would have changed the political status of Karakalpakstan, a sparsely populated region in western Uzbekistan, by undermining its nominal autonomy. This aspect unexpectedly spurred large-scale protests that turned violent, leaving at least 21 people killed and over 200 injured. President Mirziyoyev subsequently announced that constitutional articles concerning Karakalpakstan would remain unchanged. A constitutional referendum is planned for spring 2023.

Figure 1. Map of Uzbekistan



Source: CRS

**Human Rights.** International governments and nongovernmental organizations have lauded Uzbekistan's progress on human rights since its leadership transition, although concerns persist among some observers. The U.S. State Department has recognized the Mirziyoyev government's "significant efforts" to eliminate forced labor in the harvesting of cotton, the country's primary cash crop. The International Labour Organization determined that Uzbekistan's 2021 cotton harvest was free from systemic forced labor and systemic child labor. The Uzbek state strictly controls and monitors religious practices, and unregistered religious activity is criminalized. A new law on religion passed in 2021 eases some restrictions but has drawn criticism from religious freedom advocates for maintaining significant government control over religious life. According to the State Department, other major human rights issues in Uzbekistan include arbitrary arrest and detention, torture, restrictions on freedom of expression and freedom of the press, and restrictions on civil society.

**Terrorism and Violent Extremism.** Terrorist attacks within Uzbekistan are rare, but Uzbek nationals have been involved in international terrorist activity. Government crackdowns drove domestic Islamist extremist groups out of the country in the 1990s, and some Uzbek militants allied themselves with the Taliban, Al Qaeda, or the Islamic State (IS) in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Although other Uzbek nationals have been involved in terrorist attacks abroad, they were predominantly radicalized outside of Uzbekistan, often as labor migrants in Russia or Turkey. In 2017, a U.S. permanent resident from Uzbekistan who pledged allegiance to IS killed eight people in a vehicular attack in New York. About 1,500 Uzbek nationals travelled to Syria and Iraq to fight with IS; including women and children, the total estimated number of Uzbek citizens associated with IS is 3,000. Uzbekistan was among the first countries to undertake a large-scale repatriation and rehabilitation effort for its IS-affiliated nationals, bringing back over 500 women and children between 2019 and 2021. Uzbek foreign fighters remain an international concern due to their ongoing participation in armed groups active in Syria and Afghanistan.

### Uzbekistan at a Glance

**Land Area:** 425,400 square km., slightly larger than California  
**Population:** Approximately 35 million (2021)  
**Ethnic groups:** Uzbek 83.8%, Tajik 4.8%, Kazakh 2.5%, Russian 2.3%, Karakalpak 2.2%, Tatar 1.5%, other 4.4% (2017 est.)  
**Religion:** Muslim 88% (mostly Sunni), Russian Orthodox 3.5%, other 3%  
**Language:** Uzbek (official) 74.3%, Russian 14.2%, Tajik 4.4%, other 7.1%  
**GDP/GNI per capita (2021):** \$69.2 billion/\$1,960  
*Data from the World Bank, the CIA World Factbook, and the U.S. State Department*

## Economy

**Key Sectors.** Uzbekistan is a lower middle-income country with significant natural resources and relatively well developed infrastructure. Major export industries include cotton, natural gas, uranium, and gold. The country is the world's seventh-largest producer of cotton, and is moving to transition from raw cotton exports to textile production. Uzbekistan has sizeable natural gas reserves; the primary destination for natural gas exports is China, although the majority of production is consumed domestically. Uzbekistan is also the world's seventh-largest uranium supplier. According to Russian government figures, there were more than 4.5 million Uzbek labor migrants in Russia in 2021; the actual number may be higher. Remittances amounted to about 12% of GDP in 2020.

**Economic Challenges.** The COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on Uzbekistan's economy, which faced pressure due to lower exports, lower natural gas prices and export volumes, decreased remittances, and domestic economic disruption. The World Bank estimates that Uzbekistan's GDP expansion slowed to 1.9% in 2020 (down from 5.7% growth in 2019), and rebounded to 7.4%

growth in 2021. Uzbekistan has extensive economic ties to Russia, rendering it vulnerable to fallout from the conflict in Ukraine and related sanctions. The World Bank assesses that Uzbekistan's GDP growth slowed to 5.7% in 2022 as a result of the war, and projects 4.9% growth in 2023.

## Foreign Policy and U.S. Relations

**Foreign policy.** Under Karimov, Uzbekistan pursued a largely isolationist foreign policy. Since 2016, Uzbekistan has reengaged with the international community and has moved to normalize previously tense relations with its neighbors. In 2020, Uzbekistan became an observer in the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union, although many analysts doubt that Uzbekistan will seek full membership in light of the war in Ukraine. Uzbekistan is also pursuing accession to the World Trade Organization. Uzbekistan is a member of the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization and has received sizeable investment from China as part of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine began on February 24, 2022, the government of Uzbekistan has avoided endorsing Russian aggression and has expressed support for Ukraine's territorial integrity.

**Afghanistan.** Under President Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan sought to position itself as an intermediary between the Taliban and the Afghan government, in line with Uzbekistan's stated aim of facilitating intra-Afghan peace talks. Since the August 2021 Taliban takeover, Uzbekistan has pursued high-level engagement with the Taliban, while maintaining that Uzbekistan will not extend recognition to the Taliban government before the international community does. Most analysts consider Uzbekistan's stance toward the Taliban to be pragmatic, with the priority of ensuring Uzbekistan's security.

**U.S. Relations.** U.S. relations with Uzbekistan have improved significantly since 2016, reflecting the country's broader development of international ties. U.S. officials continue to express strong support for Uzbekistan's reform efforts. President Mirziyoyev traveled to Washington, DC, in May 2018 and lauded the "new era of the strategic partnership" between the two countries.

**U.S. Foreign Assistance.** U.S. foreign assistance to Uzbekistan aims to support the country's reform efforts while addressing the ongoing consequences in Uzbekistan of sanctions imposed on Russia by reducing Uzbekistan's reliance on Russian markets. Assistance to Uzbekistan also includes support for nonproliferation activities and public health programs, as well as for efforts to expand civil society, strengthen journalistic professionalism, increase judicial independence and professionalism, and develop governance capacity. Aid is also intended to bolster Uzbekistan's border security and counterterrorism capabilities. The State Department requested \$48.9 million in assistance to Uzbekistan in FY2023, as compared to \$44 million requested for FY2022 and \$43.99 million allocated in FY2021.

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