



Tajikistan

Overview

Tajikistan is a landlocked Central Asian country that borders four other states, including China and Afghanistan, and maintains close ties with Russia. Formerly a constituent republic of the Soviet Union, Tajikistan became independent in 1991. The country's long border with Afghanistan and the specter of spreading regional instability draw interest in Tajikistan from China, Russia, and the United States, as well as some Members of Congress. Because Tajikistan depends heavily on remittances, primarily from Russia, the COVID-19 pandemic and repercussions from Russia's war in Ukraine are causing significant economic strain. Tajikistan is becoming increasingly dependent on China, which is Tajikistan's largest foreign creditor. Tajikistan has faced violent attacks attributed to the Islamic State (IS), but the government also uses the prospect of insurgent activity as a pretext for stifling opposition. President Emomali Rahmon and his family control the government and significant sectors of the economy, and corruption is pervasive.

Political Background

Government: Tajikistan is a presidential republic with power heavily concentrated in the executive. The president serves as both head of state and head of government; the role and influence of the legislature is limited. President Rahmon has been in power since 1992. He was exempted from term limits in a 2016 constitutional referendum that also granted him and his family immunity from prosecution. Tajikistan under Rahmon has been termed a "nepotistic kleptocracy," as a small group of families close to the president dominate the political and economic spheres. All six parties in parliament support Rahmon. As speaker of the parliament's upper chamber, the president's son, Rustam Emomali, is first in the line of presidential succession. No elections in Tajikistan have been deemed free and fair by observers from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

Stifled Opposition: Shortly after Tajikistan became independent in 1991, the country fell into a five-year civil war (1992-1997) that claimed over 50,000 lives and displaced more than half a million people. The Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), which fought with anti-government forces, was legalized following the 1997 peace deal and adopted an agenda of democratization. It went on to become Tajikistan's second-largest party. In 2015, the government outlawed the IRPT and labelled it a terrorist organization in what the U.S. State Department characterized as "steps to eliminate political opposition." Some of the party's leaders have been sentenced to lengthy prison terms, while others have fled the country. The March 2020 parliamentary elections, the first since the IRPT was banned, included candidates from one opposition party, but

it failed to secure any seats. International analysts questioned the integrity of the electoral results.

Figure 1. Map of Tajikistan



Source: Graphic created by CRS.

Human Rights: According to the U.S. State Department, significant human rights issues in Tajikistan include politically motivated reprisals against its citizens living in foreign countries, forced disappearances, torture, arbitrary detention, and a non-independent judiciary, as well as significant restrictions on freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, freedom of movement, religious freedom, and political participation. Since 2021, Tajikistan's government has been engaging in what some analysts term an "unprecedented" crackdown on local leaders and activists in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO), a remote, mountainous region whose inhabitants are primarily Pamiris, an ethnically, culturally, and linguistically distinct group. The United States and other governments have expressed concern about the human rights situation in GBAO, as have nongovernmental organizations including Human Rights Watch.

Tajikistan severely curtails media freedom. Reporters Without Borders ranked Tajikistan 152nd out of 180 countries in its 2022 *World Press Freedom Index*. Members of Congress have expressed concerns about government pressure on independent media outlets, particularly the congressionally-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

Tajikistan has faced criticism, including from some in Congress, for engaging in transnational repression of government critics, including targeting dissidents through International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) wanted persons notices. In response to such actions by Tajikistan and other countries, the 117th Congress introduced the Transnational Repression Accountability and Prevention Act to counter politically-motivated abuse of INTERPOL; the bill did not emerge from committee.

The government of Tajikistan restricts and strictly regulates religious practices. An estimated 98% of the country's population is Muslim, primarily Hanafi Sunni. Authorities target outward signs of religiosity, harassing women who wear hijabs and men with beards. Minors are prohibited from participating in public religious activities. The government also places restrictions on minority religious groups, including Christian denominations. Tajikistan is designated a "Country of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. The State Department regularly waives related sanctions, citing U.S. national interest.

Tajikistan at a Glance

Land area: 139,960 sq. km. (about the size of North Carolina)

Population: 9.8 million (2021 est.)

Ethnicities: 84% Tajik, 14% Uzbek, 2% other (2014 est.)

Religions: 95% Sunni Muslim, 3% Shia Muslim, 2% other (2014 est.)

GDP/GDP per capita (2021): \$8.7 billion/\$897

Data from the World Bank and the CIA World Factbook

Terrorism and Violent Extremism: The government of Tajikistan estimates that 1,900 of its citizens, including women and children, traveled to Syria and Iraq to join IS or other terrorist groups. Analysts assess that many Tajiks were radicalized as labor migrants in Russia. In 2019, Tajikistan became one of the first countries to undertake an organized, large-scale repatriation effort, bringing home 84 children from Iraq; a further 146 women and children were repatriated from Syria in 2022. The U.S. Institute of Peace has provided support for Tajikistan's reintegration and rehabilitation efforts. Central Asian foreign fighters remain an international concern due to their ongoing participation in armed groups active in Syria and Afghanistan. In the wake of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, IS has reportedly increased the production and dissemination of propaganda and recruitment materials targeting Tajikistan.

Tajikistan has experienced several violent incidents attributed to IS, including prison riots in 2018 and 2019 and a 2019 attack on a border post. Some analysts argue that a lack of transparency on the part of Tajik authorities makes it difficult to determine the true nature of these events. Government critics also contend that authorities use the specter of violent extremism as a pretext to repress political dissidents. In 2018, four Western cyclists, including two Americans, were killed in a terrorist attack. The Tajik government blamed the attack on the IRPT, even though the attackers had recorded a video declaring their IS allegiance.

Economy

Key Sectors: Tajikistan is an impoverished country that depends on metal and mineral exports, and remittances from migrant workers. The country has significant potential to develop hydropower infrastructure and export electricity to South Asia, an initiative supported by the partially U.S.-funded Central Asia South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade Project (CASA-1000). If finished, the massive

Rogun Dam could make the country a net energy exporter. Tajikistan's energy sector is vulnerable to climate change, as reduced snowfall can depress hydroelectric output.

Economic Dependence on Russia: Tajikistan depends heavily on remittances from labor migrants in Russia, which equaled over one-third of Tajikistan's GDP in 2021. This renders Tajikistan highly vulnerable to external shocks. The World Bank estimates that Tajikistan's GDP growth fell to 4.4% in 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (down from 7.4% in 2019), rebounding to 9.2% in 2021. Despite economic challenges stemming from Russia's war in Ukraine, the World Bank estimates 4.2% growth in 2022 and projects 4.8% growth in 2023.

Chinese Investment: In recent years, China has emerged as one of Tajikistan's most important economic partners, and has made a range of investments in Tajikistan as part of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative. Approximately \$2 billion of Tajikistan's \$3.3 billion in external debt is owed to the state-owned Export-Import Bank of China.

Foreign Policy and U.S. Relations

Foreign Policy: Russia remains Tajikistan's primary security partner, providing training and equipment to the Tajik armed forces, and Tajikistan hosts a large Russian military base. Previously tense relations between Tajikistan and neighboring Uzbekistan have improved markedly since 2016. Tensions on the largely undemarcated Kyrgyz-Tajik border periodically erupt into violence. In September 2022, over 100 people were killed and over 100,000 displaced due to fighting between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Tajikistan's long, porous border with Afghanistan is a source of concerns about transnational threats such as violent extremism and narcotics trafficking. The United Nations estimates several hundred Tajik nationals are present in Afghanistan as members of terrorist groups affiliated with Al Qaeda or IS. More than 200 Tajik nationals have reportedly joined the Taliban. Afghanistan-based terrorist groups cooperate with organized criminal networks involved in smuggling narcotics from Afghanistan into Tajikistan.

Security Cooperation with China: Tajikistan is increasing security cooperation with China, which views the country as an important barrier against potential extremist spillover from Afghanistan. China has deployed personnel from its People's Armed Police to Tajikistan's Pamir Mountains, close to the border with Afghanistan. China also supplies Tajikistan with military hardware and engages in training exercises with Tajik military units. Tajikistan is a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

U.S. Relations: U.S. foreign assistance aims to maintain Tajikistan's sovereignty, security, and stability. U.S. aid to Tajikistan includes support to public health programs as well as programs intended to strengthen democratic institutions, address climate change, and improve business opportunities. U.S. officials note Tajikistan's desire for a strong security partnership with the United States, and the two countries work together on counternarcotics, nonproliferation, and border security. The State Department

requested \$55.15 million for assistance to Tajikistan in FY2023, compared to \$49 million allocated in FY2021.

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