



Tajikistan

Overview

Tajikistan is a landlocked 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. Because Tajikistan depends heavily on remittances, primarily from Russia, the ongoing Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is causing significant economic strain. Tajikistan is also becoming increasingly dependent on China, which is Tajikistan's largest foreign creditor and is building up a security presence in the country. Tajikistan has faced incidents of violence 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 the 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 Cooperation 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 State Department, major human rights issues in Tajikistan include unlawful or arbitrary killings by prison authorities, torture, arbitrary detention, and a non-independent judiciary, as well as significant restrictions on freedom of expression, freedom of movement, and political participation.

Media freedom in Tajikistan is severely curtailed, and the government routinely blocks access to certain websites and internet services. Reporters Without Borders ranked Tajikistan 161st out of 180 countries in its 2019 World Press Freedom Index, down from 149th in 2018. Some 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 for engaging in transnational repression of government critics who have left the country. This includes targeting IRPT members and other dissidents through law enforcement mechanisms such as International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) wanted persons notices and pressuring family members who remain in Tajikistan. In response to such actions by Tajikistan and other countries, in 2019 Congress introduced the Transnational Repression Accountability and Prevention Act to counter politically-motivated abuse of INTERPOL.

The government of Tajikistan restricts and strictly regulates religious practices in the country. 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.

Tajikistan at a Glance

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

Population: 9.3 million (2019 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 (2019): \$8.1 billion/\$874

Data from the World Bank and the CIA World Factbook

Terrorism and Violent Extremism: The government of Tajikistan estimates that about 1,900 of its citizens, including women and children, left for Syria and Iraq to join IS or other terrorist groups. Among them was Colonel Gulmurod Khalimov, the U.S.-trained commander of a special Tajik police unit who was reportedly killed in Mosul in 2016. As with other Central Asian foreign fighters, many Tajiks were radicalized as labor migrants in Russia. In 2015, the government offered conditional amnesty to those who returned from Syria voluntarily and renounced violence. According to Tajikistan’s Ministry of Internal Affairs, 163 foreign terrorist fighters have returned to the country; some returnees have gone on to participate in government-sponsored anti-extremism campaigns, while others have been imprisoned. In 2019, Tajikistan became one of the first countries to undertake an organized, large-scale repatriation effort, bringing home 84 children whose mothers are serving prison sentences in Iraq. The United States Institute of Peace has provided support for Tajikistan’s reintegration and rehabilitation efforts. Plans to repatriate Tajik citizens from camps in northern Syria were suspended due to Turkey’s October 2019 military operations in the area. Central Asian foreign fighters remain an international concern due to their ongoing participation in armed groups active in Syria and Afghanistan.

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 one of the world’s poorest countries, with an economy dependent on metal and mineral exports and remittances from migrant workers. Tajikistan 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, but its completion may be delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. 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 accounted for almost a third of Tajikistan’s GDP in 2019 (down from almost half in 2013). This renders Tajikistan highly vulnerable to external shocks. Remittances have fallen significantly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the World Bank projects that GDP growth will fall to 1% or lower in 2020 (down from 7.5% in 2019).

Chinese Investment: In recent years, China has emerged as one of Tajikistan’s most important economic partners, holding the majority of the country’s foreign debt. China has made a range of investments in Tajikistan as part of the Belt and Road Initiative, and Huawei equipment comprises as much as 90% of Tajikistan’s telecommunications infrastructure.

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 partially undemarcated Kyrgyz-Tajik border periodically erupt into violence. Tajikistan’s long, porous border with Afghanistan is a source of security concerns because of transnational threats such as violent extremism and narcotics trafficking. In 2019, the United Nations estimated that about 100 Tajik nationals were present in Afghanistan as part of terrorist groups affiliated with Al Qaeda or IS. Afghanistan-based terrorist groups cooperate with organized criminal networks involved in smuggling narcotics from Afghanistan into Tajikistan.

Security Cooperation with China: Tajikistan is increasingly engaging in security cooperation with China, which views the country as an important barrier against potential extremist spillover from Afghanistan into Xinjiang. China has deployed personnel from its People’s Armed Police to Tajikistan’s Pamir Mountains, close to the border with Afghanistan. China has also supplied Tajikistan with military hardware and engages in training exercises with Tajik military units. The two countries work with Afghanistan and Pakistan on counterterrorism issues through the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism. Tajikistan is also a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

U.S. Relations: U.S. engagement with Tajikistan focuses largely on security cooperation, particularly in counter-narcotics, counterterrorism, and nonproliferation. Tajikistan lies along a major drug trafficking route for opiates from Afghanistan to Russia and Europe, and the United States provides equipment and training to relevant Tajik agencies. Tajikistan also works with the United States to promote greater regional connectivity in Central Asia and is seen as an important partner for promoting stability in Afghanistan. Congress appropriated \$49.9 million in assistance for

Tajikistan for FY2019; the State Department requested \$14.2 million for FY2020 and \$28.5 million for FY2021.

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