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Tajikistan

Overview

Tajikistan is a landlocked Central Asian country that borders four other states, including the People's Republic of China (PRC, or 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 has drawn interest in Tajikistan from China, Russia, and the United States, as well as some Members of Congress. Tajikistan depends heavily on remittances, primarily from Russia, and is becoming increasingly dependent on China, its largest foreign creditor. The country has faced violent attacks attributed to the Islamic State (IS), but the Tajik 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. As speaker of the parliament's upper chamber, the president's son, Rustam Emomali, is first in the line of presidential succession. Some analysts speculate that Rahmon may transfer power to his son before the scheduled 2027 presidential election. No elections in Tajikistan have been deemed free and fair by observers from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

Stifled Opposition: Shortly after Tajikistan became independent, 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 by membership. 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 were sentenced to lengthy prison terms, while others fled the country. Tajikistan's most recent parliamentary elections, held in March 2025, delivered a decisive victory for the ruling People's Democratic Party, which secured 49 of 63 seats in the lower house. All five parties in parliament support Rahmon. The OSCE canceled its planned election

observation mission, citing a lack of cooperation from Tajik authorities.

Figure 1. Map of Tajikistan



Source: Graphic created by CRS.

Human Rights: According to the U.S. State Department, human rights issues in Tajikistan include extrajudicial killings, torture, arbitrary arrest and detention, and a non-independent judiciary, as well as 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 minority communities in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO), a remote, mountainous region in eastern Tajikistan 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 (NGOs) including Human Rights Watch. 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. According to the NGO Freedom House, the government of Tajikistan is among the world's most aggressive in pursuing dissidents abroad.

Tajikistan severely curtails media freedom. Reporters Without Borders ranked Tajikistan 155th out of 180 countries in its 2024 *World Press Freedom Index*. Some Members of Congress have expressed concerns about government pressure on independent media outlets, particularly the congressionally-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

The government of Tajikistan restricts and strictly regulates religious practices. Experts estimate that over 90% of the country's population is Muslim, primarily Sunni. Tajik

authorities reportedly target outward signs of religiosity, including beards and hijabs, as indicators of potential extremism. A 2024 law bans “clothing alien to Tajik culture.” Minors are prohibited from participating in public religious activities and “unapproved religious education” is criminalized. The government also places restrictions on minority religious groups, including Christian denominations. The State Department has designated Tajikistan a “Country of Particular Concern” under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 but 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: 10.4 million (2024 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: \$12.1 billion/\$1,189 (2023)

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 who join extremist groups were radicalized as labor migrants in Russia. In 2019, Tajikistan became one of the first countries to undertake an organized, large-scale repatriation effort for its IS-affiliated nationals, bringing home 84 children from Iraq. As of April 2024, Tajikistan had repatriated over 380 women and minors from Syria and Iraq. 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’s return to power in Afghanistan, IS-Khorasan Province (ISKP) reportedly has increased the production and dissemination of propaganda and recruitment materials targeting Tajiks. Since 2024, Tajik nationals have reportedly participated in attacks carried out by ISKP in Iran, Turkey, and Russia, and in thwarted attacks elsewhere. In February 2025, U.S. authorities arrested a Tajik national in New York for allegedly conspiring to provide material support to IS and ISKP, among other charges.

Tajikistan has experienced several violent incidents attributed to IS, including prison riots—most recently in February 2025—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.

Economy

Key Sectors: Tajikistan is a lower-middle income country that depends on metal and mineral exports and on remittances from migrant workers, rendering its economy vulnerable to external shocks. The country has significant potential to develop hydropower infrastructure. The

massive Rogun Dam, begun in 1976 and slated for completion in 2033, could alleviate domestic energy shortages and make Tajikistan a net energy exporter. Some critics argue that, if completed, the project would negatively affect local communities and downstream ecosystems. The World Bank estimates that Tajikistan’s GDP grew by 8% in 2024, and projects 6% growth in 2025.

Economic Dependence on Russia: Russia remains the primary destination for labor migration from Tajikistan and the primary source of remittances, which equaled 38.4% of Tajikistan’s 2023 GDP according to the World Bank. Tajik labor migrants reportedly have faced increased harassment in Russia following a March 2024 terrorist attack in Moscow attributed to Tajik nationals affiliated with IS. Tajik labor migrants also reportedly have been pressured or coerced into joining the Russian military.

PRC Economic Ties: China is Tajikistan’s largest trade partner and largest foreign investor, accounting for about 30% of foreign investment in the country. China also is Tajikistan’s largest creditor, owning roughly \$900 million of Tajikistan’s \$3.2 billion in external debt as of 2024.

Foreign Policy and U.S. Relations

Foreign Policy: Russia remains Tajikistan’s primary security partner, providing training and equipment to the Tajik armed forces. Tajikistan also hosts a large Russian military base. Previously tense relations between Tajikistan and neighboring Uzbekistan have improved markedly since 2016. After tensions on the partially undemarcated Tajik-Kyrgyz border erupted into violence in 2021 and 2022, the two countries signed a border agreement in March 2025. Tajikistan’s 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. 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. PRC private security firms also maintain a presence in Tajikistan. The Tajik and PRC governments have denied 2024 reporting that China is building a base in Tajikistan. Tajikistan is a member of the PRC-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

U.S. Relations: Past U.S. foreign assistance aimed to maintain Tajikistan’s sovereignty, security, and stability, and included support to public health programs as well as programs intended to strengthen democratic institutions, address climate change, and improve business opportunities. The two countries have cooperated on counternarcotics, nonproliferation, and border security. The State Department requested \$54.4 million for assistance to

Tajikistan in FY2024, compared to an estimated \$56.7 million allocated in FY2023.

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