

Case Studies on Stagnant or Slow LDS Growth

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Missed Opportunities for LDS Outreach in Turkmenistan

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Overview

Inhabited by 5.2 million people, Turkmenistan is located in Central Asia and has a population that is predominantly Muslim (89%) with a small Christian minority (9%). Major ethnolinguistic groups include the Turkmen (85%) Uzbek (5%), and Russian (4%). The most commonly spoken languages are Turkmen (72%), Russian (12%), and Uzbek (9%). Aside from meetings that have occurred in private for foreign members within recent years, the Church has never established a presence in Turkmenistan largely due to missing its window to enter the country during the 1990s when religious freedom conditions were more accommodating to foreign, proselytism-focused Christian groups. Today current government legislation presents insurmountable barriers to an LDS establishment.
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This case study provides a brief introduction of proselytizing Christian groups in Turkmenistan and changes in government policies and legislation regulating the operation of foreign religious groups. Current barriers to establishing an LDS presence in Turkmenistan are identified. Limitations to this case study are discussed and prospects for a future LDS establishment are predicted.

Proselytizing Christian Groups in Turkmenistan

Evangelicals have maintained a minimal presence in Audemars Piguet Replica Turkmenistan for over two decades. Currently there are approximately 1,700 followers nationwide. Some progress has occurred establishing a native evangelical community among Turkmens within the past couple decades. Today there appear to be approximately 1,000 Turkmen believers worldwide [1] whereas there appeared to be none a generation ago. Historically intense opposition from the government, Muslim leaders, and the community, combined with a lack of Turkmen Christians and low receptivity among the Muslim majority, pose significant challenges for evangelicals to establish a self-sufficient, growing church whose demographics reflect that of the national population. Among ethnolinguistic groups with populations exceeding 10,000, Evangelicals report the highest percentages of members among Armenians (4.0%), Ukrainians (3.8%), and Russians (0.8%). Evangelicals report that essentially 0.0% of the Turkmen and Uzbek population are Evangelical.[2]

Jehovah's Witnesses have appeared to operate in Turkmenistan for at least two decades, although Witnesses have been unable congregations with the government during this time. Turkmenistan has historically had one of the worst human rights records for Jehovah's Witnesses worldwide. There have been reports in recent years of the government arresting, beating, and torturing some Jehovah's Witnesses for refusing compulsory military service.[3] There have been at least 34 Witnesses charged and sentenced for objecting to military service within the past five years. Some Witnesses have served multiple prison sentences.[4] Most Witnesses appear to reside in Ashgabat. There appear to be less than 500 Witnesses nationwide. There have been no recent membership or congregational data for Turkmenistan reported by the Jehovah's Witnesses due to limited religious freedom conditions. Witnesses report no Turkmen-speaking congregations outside of Turkmenistan. The official Jehovah's Witness website is translated into Turkmen (Latin and Cyrillic scripts).[5]

The Seventh-Day Adventist Church established a presence in Turkmenistan during the 1980s. Extremely slow growth has occurred ever since. Poor relations have occurred with the government. In 1999, the government razed the only Adventist meetinghouse in the entire country located in Turkmenbat. In 2000, the government detained an Adventist pastor.[6] Adventists reported one church (large or well-established congregations), one company (small or recently planted congregations), and 64 members in 2003. A decade later there was one church, two companies, and 94 members.[7] The number of annual baptisms

has varied year to year from as few as one to as many as 15 since 2003. Adventists translate general publications into the Turkmen language.[8]

Religious Freedom Conditions

Turkmenistan currently numbers among the most restrictive countries in the world in regards to religious freedom conditions due largely to concerns from government leaders on the influence of radical Islam on instituting Islamic Sharia Law and Western Christian groups promoting greater democratic freedoms. The constitution and some laws allow for religious freedom although the government and legislation restrict religious practice. Currently religious activity may only occur if authorized by the Turkmen government. All religious groups must register with the government to operate in the country. Leaders of religious groups must have "advanced theological training." The government monitors and restricts foreign financial and material assistance, the training of clergy, religious education, and the use of religious literature. Monetary penalties were introduced in September 2013 regarding the dissemination of religious literature. Both individuals from registered and unregistered religious groups may be fined for distributing religious material unless they receive state approval. Religious groups have often avoided reporting societal abuses of religious freedom due to concerns of government surveillance and harassment. There is no state religion, although the government funds the construction of some mosques and approves the appointment of Muslim clerics. Until the 2003, the government required a religious group to have at least 500 members in a single locality for a congregation to be officially registered,[9] whereas after 2003 only five adult members were required for a congregation to be registered. In 2003, a new religious law required all religious groups to register, made the operation of unregistered religious groups a crime, limited religious education, and tracked foreign financial and material assistance to religious groups. Some religious groups are required to obtain both national and local approval/registration to operate. Religious groups must register as a religious group if there are between five and 50 members in a given location and religious groups must register as a religious organization if there are at least 50 members. Religious groups report that the registration process is confusing and complicated. The law bans foreign missionary activity. The government does not provide alternatives to mandatory military service for those who object due to religious beliefs. Although there are no legal penalties for individuals changing their religious affiliation, the government scrutinizes and questions ethnic Turkmen who convert to Christianity or other non-Islamic religions. The government and society view lesser-known Protestant Christian groups with suspicion.[10]

LDS Background

In 2000, Turkmenistan became part of the Europe East Area.[11] No member group or branch accessible to the public has ever appeared to operate in Turkmenistan. Turkmenistan has never been assigned to a mission. No convert baptisms have appeared to occur in Turkmenistan. Any local members originally joined the Church in other countries.

The Church has had a handful of Turkmens join the Church through missionary efforts conducted in other countries. Senior missionaries recently reported that a Turkmen national who was a returned missionary lives in Utah. This member served his mission in California. Missionaries serving within the former Soviet Union have reported street contacting and teaching Turkmen, primarily in Ukraine.

No LDS materials have been translated into Turkmen. As of late 2014, the Church had translated two materials into Uzbek (Hymns and Child Songs, and the 13 Articles of Faith). Translations of all LDS scriptures and a sizable number of gospel study and missionary materials are available in Russian.

Current Barriers to an LDS Establishment

Some laws and government policies pose insurmountable barriers to an LDS establishment in Turkmenistan within the foreseeable future. The Church missed its window of opportunity to establish a presence during the 1990s when the government was less restrictive of foreign Christian groups operating in the country and when unregistered religious groups could operate without legal penalties. There were no laws that prohibited unregistered religious groups from operating within Turkmenistan until the 2003 Religious Law was enacted.[12] Other missionary-focused Christian groups established a formal proselytism presence in Turkmenistan during this period, whereas the LDS Church appeared to make no efforts to open the country to missionary activity due to limited numbers of missionaries assigned to the former Soviet Union, low levels of religious freedom compared to other former Soviet Republics, and a lack of growth and infrastructure within the region. Current prohibitions on foreign missionaries serving in the country, the criminalization of proselytism activities, and the lack of any Turkmen members in the country prevent any efforts by the Church to establish a presence.

The Church had no presence in Central Asia until the late 1990s when foreign members relocated to Kazakhstan for employment purposes. Distance from mission and area headquarters, limited resources allocated to the region, and a lack of vision in opening Central Asian republics to missionary work appear primarily responsible for the lack of an LDS presence in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan today. Currently the Church appears to have no Turkmen members who reside in Turkmenistan, making member-led efforts to establish an official LDS presence impossible.

The lack of a sizable Turkmen diaspora in countries where LDS missionaries proselyte and congregations operate renders any prospects to establish a presence in Turkmenistan through the conversion of Turkmens abroad unfeasible. Five countries have sizable Turkmen minority populations, including Iran (2.4 million), Afghanistan (1.6 million), Iraq (400,000), Uzbekistan (183,000), and Syria (150,000).[13] However the Church reports no missionary presence in these nations. All LDS operations in

these countries are limited to foreign military personnel who meet in private. The outlook for future LDS missionary activity in these five nations is poor for the foreseeable future due to severe restrictions on religious freedom, war, and native populations exhibiting strong ethnolinguistic ties to Islam. Russia is the country with the largest Turkmen population where LDS missionaries proselyte and where congregations openly worship, albeit there are only an estimated 36,000 Turkmen[14] residing in the entire country of over 140 million.

The revival of Islam in Central Asia within the past two decades poses serious challenges for the LDS Church to gain a foothold regardless of the status of religious freedom. Thousands of new mosques have been constructed within the past 25 years and Islamic missionaries have rekindled active religious participation among many formerly nominal Muslims. Many of the most populous ethnolinguistic groups in Turkmenistan are staunchly Muslim and present challenging conditions for LDS missionary activity. The Turkmen are 99.2% Muslim,[15] whereas the Uzbek are 95.8% Muslim.[16] The Church has not developed any teaching resources or approaches tailored to those with a Muslim background. Prospective teaching and testimony development efforts will likely experience frustrations and challenges as traditional LDS missionary approaches have been developed for those with a Christian background.

Reaching smaller cities and rural areas poses significant challenges for future LDS outreach. Half the population resides in rural areas. Islam is the most commonly practiced religion in both urban and rural areas. The Church may experience some successes among Christians in urban areas, but the more staunchly Muslim rural areas will like remain unreached for decades following the official establishment of an LDS presence.

The Church has no translations of gospel study materials or LDS scriptures in Turkmen or Uzbek. No LDS materials of any kind are available in Turkmen. A lack of gospel study materials and scriptures in Turkmen will likely pose serious challenges for missionary work and church growth. Many speak Russian as a second language, especially in large cities like Ashgabat, providing some opportunities to utilize Russian translations in initial proselytism efforts.

Limitations

The Church does not publish membership statistics for Turkmenistan and other countries without an official LDS presence in Central Asia. It is unclear how many Latter-day Saints reside in the country at present. No data is available regarding the number of Turkmen members who reside abroad.

Future Prospects

There are no realistic opportunities for the Church to establish an official presence in Turkmenistan within the foreseeable future due to severe government restrictions on religious freedom, the lack of members in the country at present, no translations of LDS gospel study materials or scriptures in the Turkmen language, and a historical lack of mission resources allocated to Central Asia. There are additional challenges for growth even if these barriers are overcome, including the resurgence of Islam since independence from the Soviet Union and no LDS teaching materials or resources tailored to those with a Muslim background. Consequently the outlook for growth appears poor even if the legal, safety, and logistical concerns that prevent an LDS establish are resolved. Proselytism efforts among Turkmens in Russia and Ukraine present the only realistic opportunities for the Church to make any headway reaching Turkmens, albeit any progress would be indirect and may not correspond with the emergence of an LDS community within Turkmenistan.

[1] "Turkmenistan," Operation World, retrieved 25 October 2014. http://www.operationworld.org/turm

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[3] "Executive Summary," International Religious Freedom Report for 2013, retrieved 25 October 2014. http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm

[4] "Jehovah's Witnesses Turkmenistan," www.freedom-now.org, retrieved 25 October 2014. http://www.freedom-now.org/campaign/jehovahs-witnesses/

[5] jw.org, retrieved 25 October 2014

[6] "Turkmenistan," International Religious Freedom Report (2001), retrieved 25 October 2014. http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2001/5699.htm

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[10] "Turkmenistan," International Religious Freedom Report for 2013, retrieved 25 October 2014. http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2013&dlid=222345

[11] Lloyd, Scott. "European continent realigned into three new areas," LDS Church News, 16 September 2000. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/38475/European-continent---realigned-into-three-new-areas.html

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[13] "Turkmen," Joshua Project, retrieved 25 October 2014. http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/15654

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[15] " Turkmen, Trukhmeny in Turkmenistan," Joshua Project, retrieved 25 October 2014. http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/15654/TX

[16] "Uzbek, Northern in Turkmenistan," Joshua Project, retrieved 25 October 2014. http://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/14039/TX