Reaching the Nations International Church Growth Almanac

Country reports on the LDS Church around the world from a landmark almanac. Includes detailedanalysis of history, context, culture, needs, challenges and opportunities for church growth.

Uzbekistan

Population: 28.93 millions (#45 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 447,400 square km. Doubly landlocked in Central Asia, Uzbekistan borders Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Turkmenistan. The low elevation desert plains and sand of the Kyzyl Kum Desert occupy most the terrain, with some mountainous areas in the extreme northeast and southeast. Continental climate occurs in most areas, characterized by hot, dry summers and cold, dry winters. Massive irrigation schemes that began diverting water to grow cotton starting in the 1960s from the Amu Darya and other major rivers that empty into the Aral Sea has resulted in the almost entire demise of the sea by the late 2000s in what many refer to as one of the greatest environmental disasters caused by mankind. Other environmental issues include blowing dust containing chemical pesticides and salts from the Aral Sea, water pollution, overuse of pesticides, increasing soil salinity, and nuclear and chemical contamination of the soil. Uzbekistan is administratively divided into twelve provinces, one autonomous republic, and one city.

Peoples

Uzbek: 80%

Russian: 5.5%

Tajik: 5%

Kazakh: 3%

Karakalpak: 2.5%

Tatar: 1.5%

Other: 2.5%

Constituting the majority, Uzbeks principally reside in the most densely populated areas of the east, south, and some areas of the west bordering Turkmenistan. Russians tend to live in the largest cities and in pockets of eastern Uzbekistan. Tajiks are concentrated in the east near the Tajikistani border and in the historical Persian cities of Bukhara and Samarkand, whereas Kazaks are primarily found in the Tashkent area, border regions with Kazakhstan, and in central Uzbekistan. Karakalpaks populate Karakalpakstan, located in west Uzbekistan south of the Aral Sea. Tatars populate a small area west of Samarkand.

Population: 29,748,859 (July 2017)

Annual Growth Rate: 0.93% (2017)

Fertility Rate: 1.76 children born per woman (2017)

Life Expectancy: 71.0 male, 77.3 female (2017)

Languages: Uzbek (70.0%), Russian (12.8%), Tajik (4.0%), Kazakh (3.1%), Karakalpak (1.6%), Korean (0.8%), other or unknown (7.7%). Uzbek is the official language. Languages with over one million native speakers include Uzbek (22.2 million) and Russian (4.07 million), and Tajik (1.26 million). There are 11.8 million Russian speakers in Uzbekistan albeit only about one-third are native speakers.

Literacy: 100% (2015)

History

Nomadic tribes have populated Uzbekistan for millennia. Alexander the Great visited the region in 327 BC on his journey to India and married a local woman. The Arabs invaded Uzbekistan in the eighth century and introduced Islam. Headquartered in present-day Uzbekistan, the Samanid Empire arose in the ninth century and ruled until the Mongol invasions in the early thirteenth century. In the fourteenth century, Samarkand became the capital of an empire established by Timur, which later divided into several city-states with political ties to Persia. The Silk Road traveled through the region, bringing additional commerce and exposure to foreign influences. The Russian Empire conquered Central Asia in the nineteenth century, placed the region under colonial administration, and encouraged Russian settlers to colonize the territory and cultivate cotton. Uzbekistan became a Soviet Socialist Republic in 1924, with the historically Tajik regions of Bukhara and Samarkand being annexed to the Uzbek Republic. Prior to independence in 1991, the Soviets took advantage of the abundant natural resources and cotton production potential. Islam Karimov, former Secretary of the Communist Party in Uzbekistan, was the president of Uzbekistan from independence in 1990 until his death in 2016. Shavkat Mirziyoyev succeeded Karimov and has improved relations with neighboring nations. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan has instigated a low-intensity insurgency since the late 1990s, resulting in several terrorist attacks in Tashkent.

A 2005 massacre at Andijan, a city in the Ferghana Valley near the Kyrgyz border, and allegations of government cover-up, continue to strain relations between Uzbekistan, Western governments, and human rights groups. Allegations of human rights violations remain a concern, particularly with the lack of political opposition, the torture of prisoners, and the poor health conditions in prisons.[1] The government maintains that nondemocratic measures are necessary to maintain stability and check the tendency of Islamic extremism and drug trafficking from surrounding nations. Uzbekistan has experienced relative stability in contrast to the violence and lawlessness in neighboring Tajikistan and Afghanistan and has largely succeeded in eradicating the poppy cultivation.

In mid-2010, approximately 100,000 ethnic Uzbeks residing in Kyrgyzstan sought temporary refuge in Uzbekistan due to ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan. The Uzbek government exercised considerable restraint and was commended by the U.S. ambassador for its humanitarian efforts.

Culture

Uzbeks and other Turkic ethnic groups originally lived nomadic lifestyles on the steppes of Central Asia. Islam traditionally shaped local culture and customs, but Russian and Soviet occupation have muted religious activity and participation. A revival of faith has begun to gather momentum in recent years. Cultural practices and attitudes often vary by ethnic group and location, with large cities exhibiting more ethnic diversity. Breads, noodles, mutton, palov (a rice-meat-vegetable dish), shurpa (a vegetable-meat soup), and green tea are common foods. Several Uzbekistani athletes have competed in the Olympics and other worldwide sporting events.[2] Alcohol and cigarette consumption rates are low. Like many other Central Asian Muslim nations, polygamy is illegal.

Economy

GDP per capita: $6,900 (2017) [11.6% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.710

Corruption Index: 22 (2017)

Uzbekistan posted steady economic growth in the late 2000s and possesses plentiful mineral resources and fossil fuels, namely natural gas, oil, gold, uranium, silver, copper, tungsten, molybdenum, lead, and zinc. Uzbekistan benefits from a highly literate, educated populace despite limited economic development. Tight government controls over the economy have limited economic growth, trade, and foreign investment although there have been recent efforts to reform the judicial system and promote free marker economics. In recent years, trade opportunities have expanded with Russia, the United States, China, and South Korea. Fourteen percent (14%) of the population lives below the poverty line, and many experience poor standards of living. Services employ 60.9% of the labor force and generate 47.0% of the GDP. Industry accounts for 13.2% of the labor force and generates 34.4% of the GDP, whereas agriculture employs 25.9% of the labor force and generates 18.5% of the GDP. Major industries include textiles, food processing, machinery, metallurgy, gold, natural gas, and chemicals. Cotton, vegetables, fruit, grain, and livestock are agricultural products. Primary trade partners include China, Switzerland, and Russia.

Uzbekistan ranked among the 25 most corrupt nations in the world according to Transparency International in 2017. Human trafficking of girls and women for commercial sexual exploitation in the region and men for forced labor in construction, cotton, and tobacco industries is a major problem. Child labor is a serious concern, especially in cotton harvesting. Uzbekistan is a transshipment point for illicit Afghan drugs to Europe and Russia. The government has eradicated most of the opium poppy crops and has recently taken significant efforts to curb human trafficking. Corruption has worsened in the past 15 years, permeating all areas of society and weakening the education system.[3]

Faiths

Muslim: 88%

Other (mainly Eastern Orthodox Christian): 12%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Catholic 5,000

Seventh Day Adventists – 698 – 17

Jehovah's Witnesses – less than 100 – 1

Latter-day Saints – ~50 – 1

Religion

Sunni Muslims are estimated to account for 88-93% of the population, but many do not actively participate in their faith. Russian Orthodox Christian constitutes the majority of the remaining population. Religious participation has increased in recent years among both religious groups, primarily among youth who account for the majority of active adherents. Most indigenous Jews have emigrated to Israel or the United States, but today there are approximately 8,000 Ashkenazi and Bukharan Jews who principally reside in Tashkent, Bukhara, and Samarkand. Three percent (3%) of the population follows other Christian denominations, atheism, Buddhism, the Baha'i faith, or Hare Krishna.[4] Most non-Muslims and non-Orthodox Christians reside in the largest cities.

Religious Freedom

Persecution Index: 16th (2018)

The constitution protects religious freedom, but the government restricts this right. The status of religious freedom continues to deteriorate. The 1998 Religious Law permits only recognized religious groups to operate and regulates which religious groups may register with the government. Registered religious groups may worship, establish schools, train clergy, and are granted freedom from persecution. However, the government frequently interferes with religious activities of registered religious groups despite previous granting of approval. Proselytism, importing or distributing religious literature, private religious instruction, the wearing of religious clothing in public places by nonclergy, and teaching religious subjects in public schools are illegal. Religious groups must obtain a license to publicize or distribute religious material. To register, religious groups must provide a list of one hundred citizen members to the Ministry of Justice. Training religious workers and clergy for registered religious groups is only permitted if a religious group has a registered central administrative body, which requires a presence in eight of the thirteen administrative provinces. The government differentiates between "illegal" and "prohibited" groups. Participation in prohibited groups, many of which are extremist Islamic groups, is a criminal offense. Many unregistered religious groups have been

subject to harassment, raids, and imprisonment, especially those that allegedly proselyte. The media frequently portrays some minority religious groups in a negative light. The government has historically restricted children and adolescents from participating in religious meetings, particularly among Christians. Although the government provides little room for minority religious groups to operate, Uzbek society is generally tolerable of other religious groups. Uzbeks who have recently converted to Christianity may experience some social pressure, especially outside the larger cities. Many nontraditional Christian groups are unable to register additional congregations, lose registration status for functioning congregations, or are unable to register at all.[5]

Largest Cities

Urban: 50.5%

Tashkent, **Samarkand, Namangan, Andijan, Nukus, Bukhara, Fergana, Qarshi, Kokand, Margilan, Angren, Jizzakh, Chirchiq, Urgench, Termez, Navoi, Almalyk, Xo'jayli, Denau, Bekabad, Shahrisabz.**

Cities listed in **bold** have no LDS congregations

One of the twenty-one cities with over 100,000 inhabitants has an LDS congregation. Twenty-two percent (22%) of the national population resides in the twenty-one largest cities.

LDS History

The Europe East Area began administering Uzbekistan in 2000.[6] A small group for LDS United States military personnel began meeting in the 2000s. In 2010, a Korean Uzbekistani LDS convert became the first Uzbekistani to serve a full-time mission in the Korea Daejon Mission. The Church assigned Uzbekistan to the Central Eurasian Mission in 2015.

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: less than 50 (2018)

Latter-day Saint membership appears to entirely consist of American expatriates or military personnel. There may be a couple of local Uzbek LDS converts who joined the Church abroad and returned to Uzbekistan.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 0 Branches: 0 Groups: 1 (2018)

There has historically been one member group that meets the needs of U.S. military personnel.[7] In 2018, a member group with approximately twenty-six members met for church meetings in Tashkent. The entire membership of the group comprised foreign members who temporarily live in the country.

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: Russian, Arabic, Turkish, Korean, Ukrainian, Armenian (East), Armenian (West).

All LDS scriptures and most materials are translated into Russian, Arabic, Korean, Ukrainian, and Armenian (East). LDS materials translated in Uzbek are limited to the Articles of Faith and Hymns and Child Songs although these materials were not available for order on store.lds.org. The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith, Book of Mormon selections, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price are translated in the western dialect of Armenian, which is spoken outside of Armenia. The only LDS scripture in Turkish is the Book of Mormon. Many unit, temple, priesthood, Relief Society, Sunday School, young women, primary, missionary, and family history materials are available in Turkish. Kazakh LDS materials are limited to the Sacrament Prayers, a basic unit guidebook, the Articles of Faith, and hymns and children’s songs. The Liahona magazine has twelve Russian, Korean, and Ukrainian issues, and four Armenian (East) issues a year.

Meetinghouses

The Tashkent Group meets in the privacy of members’ homes.

Health and Safety

Many religious groups that do not comply with the law are heavily persecuted and historically have many of their members imprisoned in harsh conditions. Health care infrastructure is moderate in large cities but is underdeveloped in small towns and villages. Violent crime is infrequent.

Humanitarian and Development Work

In 2001, the LDS Church shipped winter clothing to Afghan refugees.[8] Approximately ten humanitarian and development projects have occurred in Uzbekistan during the past decade, including community projects, maternal and newborn care initiatives, refugee response, and wheelchair donations.[9]

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

Tight government control over religious freedom and the regulated operation of nontraditional religious groups severely limits any prospective Latter-day Saint presence among the indigenous population at present. There are no realistic prospects of the LDS Church to gain recognition from the government at present due to few or no Latter-day Saint Uzbekistani citizens in the country, as religious groups must have at least one hundred citizens to register. If registered, the LDS Church would face significant challenges importing religious literature, conducting member-missionary work, and would likely be unable to place any foreign full-time missionaries even if their assignment was for humanitarian purposes. Uzbekistani LDS converts baptized abroad returning to their homeland appear to be the only realistic means of establishing a Church presence among the native population in the face of religious freedom restrictions. In view of the small number of Uzbek converts abroad (primarily in Russia), few of whom return to their homeland, there appear to be no realistic medium-term prospects for meeting the threshold of one hundred citizen members required for registration, and it is not clear that registration would be granted even if this threshold were met. Military personnel or expatriate members who temporarily live in the country for employment do not appear to face any major restrictions in their private worship.

Cultural Issues

Uzbeks are among the most tolerant of minority religious groups among ethnically Muslim Turkic peoples in the region. Prospective LDS converts would likely face harassment and isolation from their local communities for a time for leaving their traditional religious groups, but these effects would likely not impact the long-term activity of LDS members. Karakalpaks have maintained rigid observance of Islam despite past communist influence that has lessened religious activity and affiliation rates among most ethnic groups in Uzbekistan. Karakalpaks appear to be the ethnic group that may be most resistant to prospective Christian proselytism. In recent years, mosque and church attendance have steadily increased due to an increase of religious interest among male youth. Historically low religious activity rates among Muslims may favor future LDS missionary activity one day, but increasing activity rates among traditional religious groups may reduce receptivity as the population becomes more entrenched in traditional religious beliefs and practices that discourage involvement in nontraditional religions.

National Outreach

The entire population is unreached by the LDS Church with the possible exception of the personal contacts of LDS military personnel and expatriates. No LDS missions are headquartered in Central Asia, which challenges efforts to extend outreach in Uzbekistan if government restrictions are relaxed one day. In 2018, the nearest city with proselytizing missionaries was Almaty, Kazakhstan (700 kilometers from the Uzbekistani border) and extended no additional outreach in surrounding areas. Latter-day Saints have not established an official presence due to Uzbekistan’s isolation from LDS mission outreach centers, a Muslim-majority population, the tightening of restrictions of religious freedom since 1998, few LDS expatriates, and no noticeable breakthrough with Uzbekistanis joining the Church abroad in countries with LDS missions. Tashkent will be central to future LDS mission outreach if pursued one day as it is the largest city, has a more cosmopolitan atmosphere and culture than other locations, and is located close to the most densely populated areas of Uzbekistan. Prospects for a greater LDS presence in the future will depend on greater numbers of Uzbeks joining the Church abroad, the ongoing development of a nonmilitary LDS expatriate community, the translation of additional church materials and scripture into Uzbek, and improvement in religious freedom conditions for nontraditional religious groups.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

There have been no LDS convert baptisms in Uzbekistan. Member activity rates will most likely reflect those exhibited by LDS military members and in the home nations of foreign members or the nations in which local members joined the Church.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

There have been no major challenges integrating differing ethnic groups into society in recent years. The potential for conflict appears highest between Russians and Turkic peoples due to religious, cultural, linguistic, and historical differences. If LDS missionary activity commences one day, the Church will have to appropriately assimilate foreign and local members into the same congregation initially.

Language Issues

As of 2018, LDS materials in Uzbek consisted of just the Articles of Faith and Hymns and Child Songs. Uzbek is a macro-language not only spoken in Uzbekistan but in many other Central Asian and southwestern Asian nations with 29.3 million speakers. Prior to the translation of the Articles of Faith, Uzbek was the language with the ninth most speakers without LDS materials worldwide. Widespread use of Russian in large cities by many may permit the use of Russian language LDS scriptures and materials initially if proselytism occurs one day.

Missionary Service

Only one local member has served a full-time mission. No missionary work had occurred in Uzbekistan as of 2018.

Leadership

Foreigners will likely constitute the local leadership for many years or decades.

Temple

Uzbekistan is assigned to the Kyiv Ukraine Temple district.

Comparative Growth

Uzbekistan is the most populous of the former Soviet Central Asian republics, yet Kazakhstan is the only Central Asian nation with an official LDS presence and full-time missionaries assigned. Other former Soviet Republics have neither an official Church presence nor full-time missionaries assigned. Only Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have a few local members, whereas Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan appear to have no known native Latter-day Saints who reside in these countries. Azerbaijan, the only other Muslim-majority former Soviet Republic, has no official LDS presence and only a small group of foreign members. Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan each appear to have small groups of Latter-day Saints on United States government assignment.

Many missionary-oriented Christian denominations have gained small numbers of converts, especially among Uzbeks and Russians. Fifty-eight Korean Christian, twenty-three Baptist, twenty-one Pentecostal, and three Lutheran churches were registered in May 2008.[10] In the late 2000s and in 2010, many of these groups reported low membership growth rates and few new converts. Seventh Day Adventists have experienced membership and congregational decline over the 2000s. Seventh-Day Adventist membership for Uzbekistan is half of what it was a decade ago. Legal obstacles and government interference have significantly reduced the impact and reception of these religious groups by Uzbek society. Many of these groups struggle to import, print, and distribute religious literature due to bans and tight government regulation of printed religious materials.

Future Prospects

Proselytism bans, government restrictions on religious freedom, a lack of native Latter-day Saints, no government recognition, distance from the nearest mission, and a lack of church materials in Uzbek and other Turkic languages found in the region are significant obstacles that prevent a Church establishment among the general population. LDS missionary activity may occur one day if the government permits greater religious freedom for nontraditional religious groups, substantial numbers of Uzbekistanis join the Church abroad and return to their homeland, and a strong expatriate LDS community is permanently established in Tashkent. The assignment of Uzbekistan to the Central Eurasian Mission in 2015 may help coordinate resources and develop strategic vision to establish a permanent presence in Uzbekistan one day if significant changes occur to religious freedom conditions and legislation governing the operation of religious groups.

[1] “Background Note: Uzbekistan,” Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, 19 August 2010. http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2924.htm

[2] “Culture of Uzbekistan,” Wikipedia.org, retrieved 24 November 2010. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture_of_Uzbekistan

[3] “Background Note: Uzbekistan,” Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, 19 August 2010. http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2924.htm

[4] “Uzbekistan,” International Religious Freedom Report 2017. Accessed 29 September 2018. https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dlid=281040#wrapper

[5] “Uzbekistan,” International Religious Freedom Report 2017. Accessed 29 September 2018. https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dlid=281040#wrapper

[6] 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

[7] “Group Leader Locations,” Military Relations, retrieved 24 November 2010. http://lds.org/pa/display/0,17884,5463–1,00.html

[8] “Winter clothing shipped to Afghan refugees,” LDS Church News, 10 November 2001. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/40853/Winter-clothing-shipped-to-Afghan-refugees.html

[9] “Where We Work,” LDS Charities. Accessed 29 September 2018. https://www.ldscharities.org/where-we-work

[10] “Uzbekistan,” International Religious Freedom Report 2009, 26 October 2009. http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127374.htm