

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.



Turkmenistan

Population: 5.17 millions (#120 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 488,100 square km. Landlocked in Central Asia, Turkmenistan borders Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Kazakhstan, and the Caspian Sea. Most terrain consists of sandy dunes and plains of the Karakum Desert. Mountains line the Iranian border, and some plateaus and low hills are found near the Caspian Sea. Two large bodies of water are in the north: Sarygamysh Lake along the Uzbekistani border and a large lagoon of the Caspian Sea named Garabogazkol. The Amu Darya River runs along the Uzbekistani border. One of the longest canals in the world, the Karakum Canal carries water over 1,300 kilometers from the Amu Darya River across the desert to Ashgabat. Environmental issues include soil and groundwater contamination from agricultural chemicals and pesticides, soil salination, poor irrigation methods, desertification, Caspian Sea pollution, and the reduced ability of the Amu Darya River to replenish water in the Aral Sea as a result of large amounts of water diverted by the Karakum Canal. Turkmenistan is administratively divided into five provinces and one independent city.

Peoples

Turkmen: 85%

Uzbek: 5%

Russian: 4%

Other: 6%

Demographics have shifted since independence as a result of Russian and Uzbek emigration. In 1995, Russians accounted for 10% of the population and Uzbeks for 9%,[1] around twice the percentage in 2010. Turkmen and Uzbeks are traditionally Muslim and are Central Asian Turkic ethnic groups. Turkmen constitute the majority in nearly all populated areas. Uzbeks are concentrated along the Uzbekistani border, especially in the border town of Turkmenabat, where they constitute a majority. Russians reside in the largest cities and some isolated areas. Other ethnic groups account for a small minority and primarily consist of Central Asian Muslim groups.

Population: 5,351,277 (July 2017)

Annual Growth Rate: 1.12% (2017)

Fertility Rate: 2.07 children born per woman (2017)

Life Expectancy: 67.4 male, 73.6 female (2017)

Languages: Turkmen (67%), Russian (11%), Uzbek (8%), Kazakh (2%), other/unspecified (12%). Turkmen is the official language and the only language with over one million speakers (3.82 million).

Literacy: 99.7% (2015)

History

Humans have populated Turkmenistan for millennia, likely arriving from nearby areas that are more suitable for human habitation. In the fourth century BC, Alexander the Great conquered the region. The Parthian Kingdom began ruling the area 150 years later, establishing its capital nearby modern-day Ashgabat. Islam spread to Turkmenistan as a result of Arabs invading the region in the seventh century AD. The establishment of the famed Silk Road occurred around this time, providing greater trade between Europe and Asia and traversing Central Asia. In an attempt to expand into Afghanistan, the Seljuk Empire based many of its resources in Turkmenistan in the mid-eleventh century. The Mongols conquered the region in the twelfth century, which was subsequently followed by foreign occupation by various empires and intertribal wars during the next seven centuries. Turkic groups entered the territory of Turkmenistan and gradually displaced or assimilated with indigenous peoples.

Merv, located in eastern Turkmenistan, is believed by many historians to have been the largest city in the world in the twelfth century before it was destroyed by the Mongols and its population massacred in 1221.[2] Turkman tribes were feared as nomadic raiders who raided surrounding settlements and carried off captives to be sold as slaves. The Russian Empire began expanding into Turkmenistan in the late nineteenth century, successfully capturing the area by 1894. Most large cities in Turkmenistan today are relatively young, dating back to the era of Russian colonialism.

In 1924, the Soviets formed the Turkmen Republic, one of the fifteen Soviet republics at the time. Turkmenistan became independent in 1991, and Saparmyrat Niyazov ruled as president until his death in 2006. Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow has ruled as president since his election in 2007. The government remains highly centralized and maintains a monopoly on many sectors of the economy as well as tight control of the press. Many aspects of the constitution are not recognized by the government.[3] Today, Turkmenistan is one of the most closed nations in the world. Foreign tourists must be accompanied by a registered tour guide, and visas list allowed areas of travel. Even residents of nearby Turkic Central Asian nations often face difficulty getting a visa.

Culture

Turkmen traditionally lived as nomadic horsemen in clans. Local carpet weaving is renowned internationally due to its intricate designs. Russian and Soviet occupation introduced the Russian language, spoken by nearly the entire urban population. Unlike many Muslim nations, polygamy is illegal in Turkmenistan. Cigarette consumption rates compare to the worldwide average, whereas alcohol consumption rates are low.

Genetic studies demonstrate that most Turkmen have European mitochondrial DNA lineages, with about 20% having Mongoloid lineages; the Turkmen ethnicity is characterized by a full phenotypic spectrum from European to Mongoloid.[4]

Economy

GDP per capita: $18,100 (2017) [30.4% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.706

Corruption Index: 19 (2017)

Irrigation has transformed many arid desert areas of Turkmenistan into productive agricultural land for cotton. Lower crop yields for cotton have dropped the country's former position as the tenth largest cotton producer worldwide. Turkmenistan has the world's sixth largest estimated natural gas reserves, contributing to the higher GDP per capita than in most other former Soviet Central Asian Republics. The government remains cautious about privatizing industry and economic reform. Historically high unemployment rates (60% in 2004), low living standards, government monopoly on oil and natural gas revenues, a limited education system, and corruption are barriers to greater economic development. Prospects appear highest for economic growth fueled by oil and natural gas exports, which are more easily transported through recently completed pipelines through China and Iran. Primary trade partners include China, Turkey, and Algeria.

The president is the source of political power in Turkmenistan. Corruption is perceived as widespread and present in all areas of society. Transparency International ranks Turkmenistan as the most corrupt nation among former Soviet republics. The government lacks financial transparency and severely limits many democratic freedoms. Turkmenistan is a transshipment point for Afghan narcotics destined for Russia and Europe, although the Turkmen government has taken steps to combat narcotic trafficking.

Faiths

Muslim: 89%

Christian: 9%

Unknown: 2%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Russian Orthodox – 100,000

Armenian Apostolic – 10,000

Evangelicals – 1,718

Jehovah's Witnesses – 500?

Roman Catholic – 100

Seventh Day Adventists – 94 – 3

Latter-day Saints – less than 20 – 1

Religion

There is a strong link between Turkmen ethnicity and Islam. Most the population is Sunni Muslim. Since independence, there has been a revival of Islam, tightly controlled by the government as the number of mosques operating grew from 4 to 398 in 2009. Turkmenistan boasts the largest mosque in Central Asia in the village of Gypjak, the hometown of former president Saparmurat Niyazov, situated not far from the capital of Ashgabat. Local interpretations of Islam are a greater social influence than the traditional mosque-focused practice of Islam due to seventy years of Soviet rule, government restrictions, and the infusion of local culture with religious beliefs and practices. The Turkmen practice of Islam places a heavy influence on birth, marriage, death, and shrine pilgrimage. Christians constitute less than 10% of the population and are predominantly Russian Orthodox or Armenian Orthodox. Small numbers of Shia Muslims live along the Iranian border or in Turkmenbashy. There are approximately 200-250 Jews,[5] most originating from Ukraine during World War II.[6]

Religious Freedom

Persecution Index: 19th (2018)

The constitution protects religious freedom, but the government restricts this right. The government limits activities of minority religious groups not for doctrinal reasons, but out of fear such groups will destabilize the government and lead to civil unrest, both from the side of Islamic extremist groups seeking to establish Sharia law and Western Christian groups perceived to desire greater democratic freedoms. There is no state religion. Religious groups must register to gain legal status; unregistered religious activity is illegal. The government continues to refuse to register some religious groups and restricted registered religious groups from owning property, hosting foreign visitors, printing and importing religious material, and proselytism. Restrictions on religious freedom have increased since independence. However, the number of adult citizen members needed for a religious group to register with the government has declined. 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,[7] 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. The government later retracted the criminalization of unregistered religious activity due to international pressure. The government has made little effort to disclose to the public which religious groups are officially registered, which may allow some repression of registered religious groups without societal backlash. Nine religious groups became the first to register with the government aside from Muslims and Russian Orthodox Christians in 2004. Some of the groups recognized at this time included an Evangelical Baptist church, Seventh Day Adventists, and Pentecostals. The 2016 Law on Religious Organizations and Religious Freedom requires all religious groups to reregister with the government through the Ministry of Justice as either religious groups (less than 50 members) or religious organizations (50 or more members). There have been no recent reports of societal abuse of religious freedom. However, individuals from predominantly Muslim ethnic groups who convert to Christianity can be ostracized from the community and experience societal scrutiny. Many religious groups, whether registered or unregistered, report challenges locating meetinghouses for worship. The current law does address foreign missionary activity or religious organizations. Jehovah's Witnesses appear to the most harassed religious group due to their noncompliance with mandatory military service and persistent proselytism. Nontraditional Christian groups, such as Protestant groups and Jehovah's Witnesses, report severe restrictions on religious freedom such as imprisonment, fines, seizure of literature, raids, torture, harassment, and house searches.

Largest Cities

Urban: 51.6%

Ashgabat, Türkmenabat, Mary, Balkanabat, Bayramaly, Türkmenbasy, Tejen, Büzmeýin, Gowurdak, Atamyrat.

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

None of the ten largest cities have an LDS congregation. Thirty percent (30%) of the national population resides in the ten largest cities.

LDS History

In 2000, Turkmenistan was assigned to the Europe East Area.[8] In 2010, the Church reported that a small group for American military personnel met in the country.[9]In 2018, there was no official church presence. Turkmenistan was assigned to the Turkey-based Central Eurasian Mission in 2015 when the mission was organized.

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: less than 20 (2018)

With the possible exception of one or two individuals, Latter-day Saint membership appears to be entirely comprised of American expatriates or military personnel.

Congregational Growth

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

One LDS congregation has historically met in the country,[10] likely in Ashgabat or Mary. However, it is unclear whether this congregations continued to operate as of 2018.

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: Russian

All LDS scriptures and most church materials are translated into Russian. The Liahona magazine has twelve Russian issues a year. Small numbers of members are available in Kazakh. A couple church materials have been translated into Uzbek.

Meetinghouses

Church meetings appear to be held in the privacy of members' homes.

Health and Safety

Many religious groups that do not comply with the law are heavily persecuted by the government and have many of their members imprisoned in harsh conditions.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church has conducted only one community project in Turkmenistan.[11]

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

The tight control of religious affairs by the government is the primary obstacle for Latter-day Saints to establish an official presence in Turkmenistan. Nonetheless, the decrease in the number of members required for a congregation to be registered in a city and the some relaxation of religious restrictions in the late 2000s under President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov are positive signs at a time when other Central Asian nations are further abrogating religious freedoms. Even if registered with the government, the Church could not proselyte and would most likely face harassment and monitoring from government authorities as with other registered nontraditional Christian groups. The Church's careful respect for the law and emphasis on being good citizens diminishes these concerns. The reduction in the number of members needed to register a religious group in 2003 that was upheld when the law was revised in 2016 is a positive development for the Church that increases the likelihood of an official Church establishment one day. A window may therefore exist for the establishment of the Church in Turkmenistan that does not appear to exist in some other Central Asian nations. However, nontraditional Christian groups experience significant opposition and suspicion, which poses significant difficulties for the Church to obtain official registration and hold public worship services.

Cultural Issues

The strong ethno-religious tie between most Central Asian ethnic groups in Turkmenistan and Islam challenges efforts to establish the Church among the indigenous population. Turkmen Islam differs from Islam practiced in many other nations as it is not as mosque-centered, but this difference will likely not make the population more receptive to the Church due to deeply entrenched cultural customs intertwined with Islamic beliefs and practices. There have been no reported instances of recent societal abuses of religious freedom aside from ostracism and scrutiny from the community, which may indicate that the population is more tolerant of religious minority groups that most nations in the region. The Church has yet to develop resources tailored to those with a Muslim religious background.

National Outreach

With the exception of those with close associations with the few Latter-day Saints in the country, the entire population remains unreached by the Church. There are no nearby mission outreach centers in any bordering nations although the assignment of Turkmenistan to the Bulgaria/Central Eurasian Mission provides some ecclesiastical oversight and resources needed to administer a Church presence one day. Distance from the closest mission, tight government restrictions since independence, a lack of Turkmen members, and a predominantly Muslim population are factors that have prevented an official Church establishment. Prospects for establishing a future Church presence will most likely depend on progress made by expatriates building up the Church, concentrated outreach to Russian and Turkmen Christian minorities, and obeying the law.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

There have been no convert baptisms in Turkmenistan. Member activity rates will most likely resemble 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 ethnic conflicts in Turkmenistan in recent years. Ethnic integration issues will likely not be a significant problem for Latter-day Saints. Assimilating foreign and local members into the same congregation may be the greatest challenge.

Language Issues

Widespread use of Russian among the general population facilitates initial mission outreach efforts by Latter-day Saints as the

Church has translated all scriptures and many church materials into this language. There are no Church materials translated into Turkmen, spoken by 6.7 million worldwide primarily in Turkmenistan, Iran, and Afghanistan. No Church materials are translated into Uzbek, spoken by 22.2 million worldwide. Few, if any, Latter-day Saints speak Turkmen, which may result in efforts to translate materials not coming to fruition for several more decades.

Missionary Service

Only one known Turkmen Latter-day Saint is known to have served a full-time mission. No missionary work had occurred in Turkmenistan as of 2018.

Leadership

As most of current membership is nonnative, foreign members will likely constitute the local leadership for the foreseeable future.

Temple

Turkmenistan is assigned to the Kyiv Ukraine Temple district.

Comparative Growth

Kazakhstan is the only Central Asian nation with an official Church presence and 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. Azerbaijan, the only other Muslim-majority former Soviet Republic, has no official presence or official congregations. Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan each appear to have small groups of Latter-day Saints on United States government assignment.

Nontraditional Christian groups have established small communities among the indigenous population in Turkmenistan. The most successful groups appear to be Jehovah's Witnesses and Evangelicals. These groups experience steady government harassment and persecution that has limited their growth. Seventh-Day Adventists report a small group of local members who regularly baptize new converts. Each of these missionary-oriented Christian groups arrived shortly after independence and some have obtained government registration.

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 Turkmen and Uzbek are significant obstacles that have prevented a formal Church establishment. Prospects appear poor for Latter-day Saints to perform missionary activity. Expatriate and local converts baptized abroad appear to be the only feasible means of a greater Church establishment in the coming years. However, there is little international Turkmen diaspora in nations with missions, and so prospects for a Church presence in Turkmenistan in the medium term appear dim.

[1] “Turkmenistan,” Rand McNally World Facts and Maps: 1995 edition, Rand McNally, 1995, p.200.

[2] “Merv,” Wikipedia.org, retrieved 9 December 2010. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Merv

[3] “Background Note: Turkmenistan,” Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, 19 August 2010. http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/35884.htm

[4] “Turkmen people,” Wikipedia.org, retrieved 9 December 2010. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turkmen_people

[5] “Turkmenistan,” International Religious Freedom Report 2017. Accessed 8 October 2018. https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dlid=281038#wrapper

[6] “Turkmenistan,” International Religious Freedom Report 2009, 26 October 2009. http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127373.htm

[7] “Turkmenistan,” International Religious Freedom Report 2002, retrieved 9 November 2010. http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2002/13987.htm

[8] 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

[9] “Church Organization in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Isolated Areas,” Military Relations, retrieved 8 November 2010. http://lds.org/pa/display/0,17884,9138–1,00.html

[10] “Church Organization in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Isolated Areas,” Military Relations, retrieved 8 November 2010. http://lds.org/pa/display/0,17884,9138–1,00.html

[11] “Where We Work,” LDS Charities. Accessed 8 October 2018. https://www.ldscharities.org/where-we-work