

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.



Tajikistan

Population: 8.05 millions (#97 out of countries)

By David Stewart and Matt Martinich

Geography

Area: 144,100 square km. Landlocked in Central Asia, Tajikistan is the smallest Central Asian nation and borders China, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Rugged, tall peaks in the Pamir and Alay Mountain ranges dominate the landscape, reaching heights of over 7,000 meters and constituted the highest peaks in the former Soviet Union. Several large rivers traverse the country, including the Daryoi Panj, Vakhsh, and Kofarnihon, creating deep, fertile valleys. Continental temperate climate occurs, marked by hot summers, mild winters in low-laying areas, and alpine conditions year round in high elevation areas. Earthquakes and floods are natural hazards. Environmental issues include a lack of waste treatment facilities, increasing soil salinity, excessive pesticide use, and heavy industrial and agricultural pollution. Tajikistan is administratively divided into two provinces, one autonomous province, and one region.

Peoples

Tajik: 84.3%

Uzbek: 13.8%

Other: 1.9%

Significant demographic population shifts have occurred since independence. In 1995, Russians and Uzbeks constituted 8% and 24% of the population, respectively.[1] As a result of heavy emigration in the past two decades, Russians account for 1% of the population today. Tajiks primarily populate central and western areas, whereas Uzbeks reside in pockets mainly in the southwest and extreme northwest. Russians live mainly in or near the largest cities. The Kyrgyz typically populate sparsely populated areas in the east near the Kyrgyzstani and Chinese borders. As many as one million Tajiks live abroad in search of employment, primarily in Russia.

Population: 8,468,555 (July 2017)

Annual Growth Rate: 1.62% (2017)

Fertility Rate: 2.63 children born per woman (2017)

Life Expectancy: 64.9 male, 71.4 female (2017)

Languages: Tajik (73%), Uzbek (11%), Kyrgyz (1%), Iranian Persian (1%), Russian (1%), Shughni (1%), other or unspecified (12%). Closely related to Farsi, Tajik is the official language. Russian is commonly used in business and government. Only Tajik has more than one million speakers (6.38 million).

Literacy: 99.8% (2015)

History

Persian tribes have populated modern-day Tajikistan since around the birth of Christ. Islam arrived in the Middle Ages, and the Samanid Empire heavily influenced the area around 1000 AD.

Tajiks are essentially Persians, and their language is a dialect of Persian mutually intelligible with Iranian Persian (Farsi). Tajiks constitute a Persian or Indo-Iranian ethnicity, distinct from the Turkic heritage of the other four former Soviet nations of Central Asia. Persians once inhabited a larger region of Central Asia, including Turkmenistan and southern parts of Uzbekistan, until Turkic and Mongol invaders drove back the Persians and repopulated much of Central Asia between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries. Persians retained hold on the mountainous region of what is now Tajikistan while becoming separated from their relatives in Iran, becoming the Tajiks.

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Russian empire began expanding into Tajikistan, subjecting the population to communist rule in the 1920s after widespread rebellion and conflict with local resistance movements. By 1929, Tajikistan became an independent Soviet Socialist Republic. As part of what has been referred to as Stalin's "reverse ethnic gerrymandering" that sought to prevent unified nationalist movements by dividing ethnic groups among several republics while introducing minority nationalities, the borders with neighboring Uzbekistan were redefined. Tajikistan lost the historical cities of Samarkand and Bukhara to Uzbekistan while gaining the Sughd region that includes the primarily Uzbek city of Khujand, founded by Alexander the Great and known anciently as "Alexandria Eschate" (Alexandria the Furthest). The northern, Uzbek-dominated Sughd region includes most of Uzbekistan's arable land and produces two-thirds of the country's GDP. The resulting ethnic tensions resulting from Stalin's "jigsaw borders" has been a cause of ongoing tension and conflict in Central Asia. Millions of ethnic Tajiks also live in northern Afghanistan and constituted the principal opposition to the Taliban as the Northern Alliance in the 1990s and early 2000s.

During the Soviet era, the Tajik economy was heavily subsidized, receiving up to 40% of its GDP from Moscow. Tajikistan declared independence in September 1991 and experienced economic collapse from which the nation has yet to emerge. Tajikistan fell into civil war from 1992 to 1997, characterized mainly by ethnic violence and lawlessness. The civil war severely damaged the nation's infrastructure and educational system; the younger generation of Tajiks are generally less educated than their Soviet-era parents.

Russia has maintained a minor military presence primarily staffed by local Tajiks. Elections in the 2000s were deemed fraudulent by most observers but did not escalate violence. President Emomali Rahmon came to power in the mid-2010s and a change to the constitution permits limitless terms and lifelong immunity. The government has been credited with improving safety and diffusing ethnic tensions, although road infrastructure remains poor, and economy and education have not returned to the level attained during the Soviet era. Tajikistan at present faces many challenges with widespread corruption.[2] Drug smuggling routes from Afghanistan to Russia and on to Europe primarily transit Tajikistan due to the weak central government, endemic corruption, porous borders, and remote, mountainous terrain.

Culture

Zoroastrianism was the dominant religion and influence from neighboring Persia until the introduction of Islam by the Arabs over a millennia ago. Today, Islam is a strong influence on daily life and cultural practices, which has experienced a steady revival since independence. The Silk Road as well as the entrance to the entire Fergana Valley region passed through Khujand in ancient times, which contributed in the development of Tajikistani culture. Russian and Soviet rule heavily influenced contemporary government, art, and theater. Following independence from the Soviet Union, a revival of indigenous cultural identity has occurred. Cuisine consists of many common foods in Central Asia, such as plov (pilaf) and green tea. Nuts, fruit, meat, and soup are widely eaten.[3] Unlike many Muslim countries, polygamy is illegal and is informally practiced by few. Cigarette and alcohol consumption rates are low.

Economy

GDP per capita: $3,200 (2017) [5.4% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.650

Corruption Index: 21 (2017)

One of the poorest former Soviet Republics, Tajikistan suffers from widespread poverty and corruption, high unemployment, outdated infrastructure, damage to the economy from the 1990s civil war, and limited trade opportunities due to its remote location and rugged terrain. Hydropower, petroleum, uranium, mercury, coal, led, zinc, tungsten, silver, and gold are natural resources, most of which have been unexploited. In the 2000s, Russia forgave most of Tajikistan's debt and in the latter portion of the decade funded infrastructure improvement projects such as additional hydroelectric dams. China has also offered loans for improving road networks and electricity infrastructure, and the United States has improved some road networks to help expand trade prospects. More recently, the government has sought to contract with European companies to improve infrastructure through Eurobond loans. Remittances from Tajiks abroad account for a significant portion of the economy. Narcotics trafficking constitutes a significant portion of the GDP. Approximately one-third of the population lives below the poverty line. Agriculture employs nearly half of the work force and generates 28.6% of the GDP. Primary crops and agricultural goods include cotton, grain, fruit, vegetables, and livestock. Services employ nearly half of the work force and account for 45.9% of the GDP, whereas industry employs 10.6% of the workforce and generates one-quarter of the GDP. Aluminum, cement, coal, gold, and silver mining are the primary industries. Russia, Turkey, Kazakhstan, and China are major trade partners.

The government lacks transparency regarding legislation and due process, which has deteriorated economic conditions and civil freedoms. A few individuals control much of the country, and corruption is viewed as widespread and present in every area of society.[4] There has been noticeable improvement in reducing corruption during the past decade. Transparency International ranks Tajikistan as one of most corrupt nations.

Faiths

Muslim: 90%

Other: 10%

Christians

Denominations Members Congregations

Russian Orthodox – 140,000?

Evangelical – 6,952

Jehovah's Witnesses – 500 – 8

Catholic – 300

Seventh Day Adventists – 204 – 9

Latter-day Saints – less than 20 – 0

Religion

Most of the population is Sunni Muslim. The Muslim identity of Central Asian peoples in Tajikistan endured communist rule, and religious service attendance has increased since independence as a result of the efforts of Muslim missionaries and the revival of Tajikistani identity. Muslim missionaries regularly proselyte, and the government has attempted to reduce their influence. Russians are predominantly Russian Orthodox. Since before independence, nontraditional Christian groups have gained few converts but continue to maintain a church presence. Society overall is tolerant of religious diversity.[5] However, in recent years society has disapproved of former Muslims who join proselytism-focused, nontraditional religious groups.[6]

Religious Freedom

Persecution Index: 22nd

The constitution protects religious freedom rights, but in practice the government restricts religious activity and emphasizes secularism. The government legitimizes religious bans, surveillance, and restrictions to reduce the spread and influence of Islamic extremism. In 2009, new legislation was passed, which granted the government more power to regulate religious activities, such as setting population quotas for mosques to operate and restricting locations in which future mosques can be constructed.[7] Current religious legislation prohibits individuals under age 18 from attending public religious meetings. Religious education is highly regulated by the government. To register with the government, a religious group must have at least ten local

members who receive a certificate stating they have lived in a specific location for at least five years, submit a religious charter, and provide evidence from local government that a meetinghouse location has been approved. The government has banned several radical Islamist sects, a few evangelical groups, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Religious groups importing religious literature face many challenges and government regulations.[8] Missionaries from registered religious groups may operate in the country, but open proselytism is discouraged. Nine additional religious groups were banned in 2010, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.[9]

Largest Cities

Urban: 27.1%

Dushanbe, Chuçand, Kurgan-T'ube, Ku-lob, Iztaravšan, Tursunzoda, Konibodom, Isfara, Vahdat, Pançakent

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

None of the ten most populous cities have a congregation of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Seventeen percent (17%) of the national population resides in the ten most populous cities.

Church History

In 2000, the Church assigned Tajikistan to the Europe East Area.[10] When Elder Russell M. Nelson visited Kazakhstan and held a special member meeting in 2003, one member from Tajikistan attended.[11] In 2007, Europe East Area President Elder Paul B. Pieper reported to the Inter Press Service News Agency that the Church had a congregation in Dushanbe.[12] In early 2010, Tajikistani government authorities reported that they banned the Church as the request for reregistration was apparently not granted.[13] The Church assigned Tajikistan to the newly organized Central Eurasian Mission in 2015. Prior to that time, Tajikistan had not pertained to a mission.

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: less than 20 (2018)

Church members residing in the country appear to primarily consist of foreign members temporarily living in Dushanbe for employment purposes. A few local converts have joined the Church abroad.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 0 Branches or groups: 0 (2018)

Church members met in private as a small group under the direct supervision of the Europe East Area Presidency before the group was closed. Foreign members met as a group during the mid-2010s in member homes. However, it is unclear whether the group still operated as of 2018.

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: Farsi, Russian, Ukrainian, German, Arabic, Kazakh, Korean.

The Church has translated all LDS scriptures and many church materials in Russian, German, Ukrainian, Arabic, and Korean. The Book of Mormon is translated in Iranian Persian (Farsi). Although spoken Iranian Persian and Tajik are mutually intelligible, Iranian Persian is written in the Persian script, which most Tajiks cannot read, whereas Tajik is written in Cyrillic. Gospel Principles and The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith are available in Iranian Persian. 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 issues a year in Russian, Ukrainian, German, and Korean.

Meetinghouses

Any church gatherings occurred in a private setting like a member's home. There is presently no official church presence in Tajikistan.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church has conducted at least fourteen humanitarian and development projects in Tajikistan such as community projects, emergency response, maternal and newborn care, and refugee response.[14]

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

Latter-day Saints face no realistic prospects of an official Church presence in the foreseeable future as the government has banned the Church. The Church likely cannot meet the minimal requirements of at least ten local members to register with the government. Once this requirement is met, it appears unlikely that the government would grant registration to the Church given its history of denying registration to other nontraditional Christian groups known with a proselytism focus. Prohibitions on children and youth attending public religious services poses a significant obstacle for families to teach and raise their children in the Church. The Church appears to have a mediocre relationship with the government given it was specifically listed among banned religious groups in 2010. Nevertheless, Church-sponsored humanitarian and development work has continued in the 2010s.

Cultural Issues

Communism left a heavy legacy on the government's relationship with religion in that religious freedom has become increasingly restricted for Muslims and Christians. Most do not actively practice their religious faith but strongly identify with their religious group along ethno-linguistic lines. If Latter-day Saint missionaries enter Tajikistan one day, they will need to tailor their finding approaches to address the strong ethnic ties with Islam among Persian peoples. The Church has not developed teaching and missionary resources tailored to those with a Muslim religious background. Low levels of religious study and participation will require appropriate gospel teaching approaches in order to instill gospel study and regular church attendance among investigators and converts. Proselytism and the conversion of Muslims to Christianity are frowned upon, which will necessitate strong member-missionary programs that rely on member referrals for full-time missionaries. The drinking of green tea is contrary to Church teachings.

National Outreach

The Church has no official presence in Tajikistan at present as a result of missing the window of opportunity to establish a presence in the late 1990s and early 2000s when conditions were most favorable for foreign, missionary-based, nontraditional Christian groups. Factors that have likely contributed to the Church not establishing a presence during this period include the lack of an official presence in any other Central Asian nations with the exception of Kazakhstan starting in 2000, distance from operating mission outreach centers, the predominantly Muslim population, civil war and conflict in the region, a tenuous security situation, and extremely few expatriate American or Western Latter-day Saints living in the country. New religious legislation renders prospects for outreach in Tajikistan unfeasible until greater flexibility and religious freedom is granted to foreign religious groups. Three-quarters of the population resides in rural areas that are often difficult to access and sparsely populated. Reaching the majority of the population will require strategic planning and proper vision with limited mission resources from church leaders if proselytism efforts are to take place one day.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

No convert baptisms appear to have occurred in Tajikistan, and no full-time missionaries have ever been assigned.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

Troubled ethnic relations between Tajiks and other Central Asian peoples may manifest themselves in the Church if congregations among the native population is established one day. Relations between Tajiks and other nationalities, including Russians, Ukrainians, and Koreans, are often better than relations between Tajiks and Uzbeks.

Language Issues

There remain no Church materials in Tajik and Uzbek, the native languages of 95% of the population. However, many Tajiks speak Russian, especially in large cities like Dushanbe. Due to linguistic similarities between Tajik and Iranian Persian, some Iranian Persian Church materials may be used in Tajikistan. However, Tajik has traditionally been written in the Cyrillic script for much of the past century, which reduces the utility of Church materials translated in Iranian Persian. Nonetheless, these Iranian Persian translations may be utilized in the future because Tajik was originally written in the Persian alphabet prior to Soviet

occupation and the government has experimented with transitioning back over to the Persian alphabet script in recent years.

The translation of basic proselytism materials in Tajik and Uzbek, such as The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith, will greatly facilitate missionary work among speakers of these languages in the event that Latter-day Saints conduct missionary activity among these ethnic groups. Russian translations of Church materials will likely be first utilized as no materials are translated into other local languages, and use of Russian by the Church can foster communication between various ethnic groups.

Missionary Service

No known Tajikistanis have served a full-time mission, and no missionaries have been assigned to the country.

Leadership

Only foreign members have appeared to previously lead church activities in Tajikistan. Foreign members likely have played and will continue to play an important role mentoring native members. Local church membership remains unable to staff leadership positions to organize an official branch due to their limited numbers and lack of training.

Temple

Tajikistan is assigned to the Kyiv Ukraine Temple district. No regular temple trips occur, and there are no foreseeable prospects for a closer temple.

Comparative Growth

Kazakhstan is the only Central Asian nation with an official Church presence and full-time missionaries assigned, whereas other former Soviet republics like Tajikistan have neither an official Church presence nor full-time missionaries assigned. Member groups have temporarily functioned for foreign members in Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. 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 Church presence but had an official branch to service foreign members in Baku until the mid-2010s. A member group may continue to operate in Azerbaijan for foreign members who temporarily live in the country for employment purposes.

Many Christian groups that proselyte report a presence in Tajikistan but experience slow growth and have few members. Jehovah's Witnesses have operated in Tajikistan for approximately sixty years.[15] Active Witnesses appear to number around 500.[16] Seventh-Day Adventists baptize few converts and have experienced significant membership decline in the past decade likely due to the emigration of many members. Most Christian groups will likely grow slowly in the coming years due to government restrictions and cultural conditions, but a continued presence allows these denominations to lay dormant until conditions for missionary work improve. Latter-day Saints have no such advantage.

Future Prospects

The government specifically banning the Church in 2010, the steady decline in religious freedom since independence, cultural proselytism restrictions, a lack Latter-day Saints, and no mission outreach centers in close proximity create an unfavorable climate for an official Church establishment within the foreseeable future. Latter-day Saints have missed the opportunity for an official Church establishment in the late 1990s and early 2000s following the civil war and prior to deterioration of religious freedom. There are ample opportunities for the Church to conduct humanitarian and development work that over time may improve relations with the government and better the living conditions of many, but a lack of a Church presence in Central Asia restricts the scope and frequency of aid and outreach in Tajikistan. Translations of Church materials in Tajik and Uzbek will be needed to conduct missionary outreach if political conditions improve one day.

[1] “Tajikistan,” Rand McNally World Facts and Maps: 1995 edition, Rand McNally, 1995, p.195.

[2] “Background Note: Tajikistan,” Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, 22 September 2010. http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5775.htm

[3] “Culture of Tajikistan,” Wikipedia.org, retrieved 1 November 2010. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture_of_Tajikistan

[4] “Background Note: Tajikistan,” Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, 22 September 2010. http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5775.htm

[5] “Tajikistan,” International Religious Freedom Report 2009, 26 October 2009. http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127372.htm

[6] “Tajikistan,” International Religious Freedom Report 2017. Accessed 11 October 2018. https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dlid=281036#wrapper

[7] “Tajikistan,” International Religious Freedom Report 2009, 26 October 2009. http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127372.htm

[8] “Tajikistan,” International Religious Freedom Report 2017. Accessed 11 October 2018. https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dlid=281036#wrapper

[9] “Tajik Court Suspends Baptist Church’s Activities,” Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, 10 February 2010. http://www.rferl.org/content/Tajik_Court_Suspends_Baptist_Churchs_Activities/1954581.html

[10] 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

[11] “Elder Nelson visits Kazakhstan,” LDS Church News, 13 September 2003. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/44312/Elder-Nelson-visits-Kazakhstan.html

[12] “Mormon Church Spreads Out in Russia,” IPS.com, 18 July 2007. http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=38583

[13] “Tajik Court Suspends Baptist Church’s Activities,” Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, 10 February 2010. http://www.rferl.org/content/Tajik_Court_Suspends_Baptist_Churchs_Activities/1954581.html

[14] “Where We Work,” LDS Charities. Accessed 12 October 2018. https://www.ldscharities.org/where-we-work

[15] “Jehovah’s Witnesses appeal to the Supreme Court of Tajikistan,” Jehovah’s Witnesses Official Media Web Site, 2 February 2010. http://www.jw-media.org/tjk/20100202.htm

[16] “Written statement on Tajikistan by the European Association of Jehovah’s Christian Witnesses,” retrieved 1 November 2010. http://www.osce.org/documents/odihr/2007/09/26593_en.pdf