



Uzbekistan

Overview

Uzbekistan is a landlocked country in Central Asia that became independent with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Because it has the largest population in the region and is the only country that borders all four other Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan), Uzbekistan is arguably a potential regional leader. The country also shares a border with Afghanistan to the south and is increasingly engaged in the Afghan peace process. U.S. policymakers have identified Uzbekistan as a key partner in addressing regional threats such as illegal narcotics, trafficking in persons, terrorism, and violent extremism, as well as in promoting stability and development in Afghanistan. Additionally, the wide-ranging reform effort currently underway in Uzbekistan creates new opportunities for U.S. engagement with the country across a range of sectors (See CRS In Focus IF11408, *Reforms in Uzbekistan*).

Political Background

Leadership Transition. From 1991 to 2016, Uzbekistan was led by President Islam Karimov, a former high-level Soviet official. International observers considered his rule authoritarian and highly repressive. After his death, Karimov was succeeded by Shavkat Mirziyoyev, an experienced politician who was prime minister under Karimov for 13 years. After serving as Acting President, Mirziyoyev handily won a December 2016 presidential election that was criticized by international observers as failing to meet democratic standards. He has since embarked on an ambitious reform agenda that challenges Karimov's legacy. Mirziyoyev's stated policies of liberalization and modernization aim to transform Uzbekistan's economy and attract increased foreign investment, while the country's reengagement with its neighbors is reconfiguring regional dynamics and furthering Central Asian connectivity, a U.S. policy priority.

Government. Uzbekistan's centralized government structure grants the executive branch extensive powers, with the president exercising a significant degree of control over the legislature and the judiciary. The president nominates the prime minister, the chair of the Senate, the general prosecutor, and all regional governors. He also approves the cabinet of ministers and appoints and dismisses all judges. By law, the president is limited to two terms, but this limit was not observed by Karimov. The bicameral legislature (*Oliy Majlis*) has historically provided neither an effective check on the executive nor a venue for genuine political debate, although its role has expanded somewhat under Mirziyoyev, who has criticized the legislative branch for failing to exercise oversight over the executive and urged greater initiative from Parliament.

2019 Parliamentary Elections. The country's first post-Karimov parliamentary elections were held in December 2019. According to international experts, the elections took place in an atmosphere of unprecedented openness and engagement with voters but did not demonstrate genuine competitiveness. The composition of Parliament remains largely unchanged, and all five parties that currently hold seats are seen as pro-government. In 2020, legislative amendments expanded the oversight powers of the *Oliy Majlis*, and the new parliament has engaged in increased debate on policy issues.

Figure 1. Map of Uzbekistan



Source: CRS

Human Rights. International organizations have lauded Uzbekistan's progress on human rights since its leadership transition, although concerns persist among some observers. The U.S. State Department has recognized the Mirziyoyev government's "significant efforts" to eliminate forced labor in the harvesting of cotton, the country's primary cash crop, for which millions of people had been coercively mobilized on an annual basis since the Soviet period. Although the government has released dozens of political prisoners and eased repression, the U.N. Committee Against Torture reported in 2019 that torture and ill-treatment of prisoners in Uzbekistan's prisons remained "widespread" and "routine." The Uzbek state strictly controls and monitors religious practices, and unregistered religious activity is criminalized. Authorities reportedly target outward signs of religiosity, particularly hijabs and beards. A new draft law on religion introduced in parliament in 2020 would ease some restrictions but has drawn criticism for religious freedom advocates for maintaining onerous registration requirements and other elements of government control over religious life. According to the State Department, other major human rights issues in Uzbekistan include arbitrary

arrest and detention, restrictions on freedom of expression and freedom of the press, and restrictions on civil society.

Terrorism and Violent Extremism. Terrorist attacks within Uzbekistan are rare, but Uzbek nationals have been involved in international terrorist activity. Government crackdowns drove domestic extremist groups out of the country in the 1990s, and some Uzbek militants have gone on to ally with the Taliban, Al Qaeda, or the Islamic State (IS) in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Although other Uzbek nationals have been involved in terrorist attacks abroad, they were predominantly radicalized outside of Uzbekistan, often as labor migrants in Russia or Turkey. In 2017, a U.S. permanent resident from Uzbekistan who pledged allegiance to IS killed eight people in a vehicular attack in New York. About 1,500 Uzbek nationals travelled to Syria and Iraq to fight with IS; including women and children, the total number of Uzbek citizens associated with IS is estimated at 3,000. Uzbekistan was among the first countries to undertake a large-scale repatriation and rehabilitation effort, bringing back 220 citizens, primarily women and children, in 2019. The country's government has stated its intention to repatriate all Uzbek citizens from Syria and Iraq. Uzbek foreign fighters remain an international concern due to their ongoing participation in armed groups active in Syria and Afghanistan.

Uzbekistan at a Glance

Land Area: 425,400 square km., slightly larger than California
Population: Approximately 34 million (2019)
Ethnic groups: Uzbek 83.8%, Tajik 4.8%, Kazakh 2.5%, Russian 2.3%, Karakalpak 2.2%, Tatar 1.5%, other 4.4% (2017 est.)
Religion: Muslim 88% (mostly Sunni), Russian Orthodox 3.5%, other 3%
Language: Uzbek (official) 74.3%, Russian 14.2%, Tajik 4.4%, other 7.1%
GDP/GNI per capita (2019): \$57.9 billion/\$1,800
Data from the World Bank, the CIA World Factbook, and the U.S. State Department

Economy

Key Sectors. Uzbekistan is a lower middle-income country with significant natural resources and relatively well developed infrastructure. Major export industries include cotton, natural gas, uranium, and gold. The country is the world's seventh-largest producer of cotton, and the Uzbek government is moving to transition from raw cotton exports to textile production. Uzbekistan has sizeable natural gas reserves; the primary destination for natural gas exports is China, although the majority of production is consumed domestically. Uzbekistan is the world's seventh-largest uranium supplier and has concluded long-term supply agreements with countries including the United States, China, India, and Japan. According to official figures, about two million Uzbeks work abroad as labor migrants, primarily in Russia; the actual number may be higher. Remittances accounted for about 15% of GDP in 2019.

Liberalization. Under President Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan has implemented economic reforms aimed at decreasing the role of the state in favor of the private sector and attracting large-scale foreign investment. The government has prioritized improving the country's business environment, and the World Bank has commended Uzbekistan's "strong progress" on economic reforms. Corruption remains a problem, however, and the State Department identifies the enduring dominance of state-owned enterprises and a lack of transparency as issues facing foreign investors.

COVID-19. The ongoing Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has had a significant negative impact on Uzbekistan's economy, which is facing pressure due to lower exports, lower natural gas prices and export volumes, decreased remittances, and domestic economic disruption. The International Monetary Fund projects that Uzbekistan's GDP expansion will slow to 1.5% in 2020 (down from an earlier projection of 6% growth).

Foreign Policy and U.S. Relations

Foreign policy. Under Karimov, Uzbekistan pursued a largely isolationist foreign policy. Since 2016, Uzbekistan has reengaged with the international community and has moved to normalize previously tense relations with its neighbors. In April 2020, Uzbekistan's parliament voted in favor of seeking observer status in the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union. Uzbekistan is also pursuing accession to the World Trade Organization, a move supported by the Trump Administration. Uzbekistan is a member of the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization and has received sizeable investment from China as part of the Belt and Road Initiative.

Afghanistan. Since 2016, Uzbekistan has been increasingly engaging with Afghanistan, working to increase trade, improve connectivity, and provide support for intra-Afghan peace talks. In May 2020, officials from the United States, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan held an inaugural trilateral meeting to discuss deepening cooperation on regional security and other issues.

U.S. Relations. U.S. relations with Uzbekistan have improved significantly since 2016, reflecting the country's broader development of international ties. The Trump Administration has expressed strong support for Uzbekistan's reform efforts. President Mirziyoyev traveled to Washington, DC, in May 2018 and lauded the "new era of the strategic partnership" between the two countries. According to Trump Administration officials, Uzbekistan's reengagement with its neighbors has invigorated the U.S.-led C5+1 framework, which provides a high-level forum for discussing regional issues.

U.S. Foreign Assistance. U.S. foreign assistance to Uzbekistan aims to support the country's reform efforts, promote the rule of law, and further economic development, especially diversification in agriculture through the utilization of U.S. technology. Aid is also intended to strengthen border controls in order to promote security and regional stability. The State Department requested \$34.74 million in appropriations for aid to Uzbekistan for FY2021, up from \$14.4 million requested for FY2020.

Maria A. Blackwood, Analyst in Asian Policy

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.